

## **HOW WE CHOOSE OUR BELIEFS**

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**ABSTRACT:** Recent years have seen increasing attacks on the "deontological" conception (or as we call it, the guidance conception) of epistemic justification, the view that epistemology offers advice to knowers in forming beliefs responsibly. Critics challenge an important presupposition of the guidance conception: doxastic voluntarism, the view that we choose our beliefs. We assume that epistemic guidance is indispensable, and seek to answer objections to doxastic voluntarism, most prominently William Alston's. We contend that Alston falsely assumes that choice of belief requires the assent to a specific propositional content. We argue that beliefs can be chosen under descriptions which do not specify their propositional content, but instead specify the mental actions by which they are formed and maintained. We argue that these actions partially constitute the beliefs and that it is in virtue of resulting from and being partially constituted by such actions that the beliefs are subject to epistemic appraisal.

### **I. Doxastic Voluntarism and the Guidance Conception of Justification**

Modern epistemology traces back to Descartes and Locke, who each set out to discover a method—a set of prescriptive norms—by which one could arrive at truth, avoid error, and assess one's cognitive activities and existing beliefs. This *guidance conception* of epistemology and associated conception of justification enjoyed near universal acceptance until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when both came progressively under attack.<sup>1</sup> Many of these attacks have drawn their strength from the guidance conception's association with a thesis that has fallen into disrepute: *doxastic voluntarism*, "the doctrine that we have extensive control over what we believe"—that "we choose what to believe."<sup>2</sup> Since "ought" implies "can," it is argued, the prescription that we *ought* to adopt a belief only if we have complied with certain norms seems to presuppose that we can choose whether or not we adopt the belief. On this view, if doxastic voluntarism is false, then prescriptive guidance about our beliefs would be inappropriate. And doxastic voluntarism is widely thought to have been refuted by Bernard Williams (1970) and William Alston (1988a).<sup>3</sup>

We think that this movement away from the traditional epistemological project is a mistake. Human beings do need the sort of guiding principles sought by Descartes and Locke—and assessing one's beliefs with reference to these methods is central to epistemic agency. Moreover, the

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<sup>1</sup> The guidance conception is sometimes referred to as "deontological" conception of justification (Alston 1988b, Plantinga 1992, Goldman 1999). The "deontological conception" is misleadingly named because epistemic guidance need not be deontological in the sense of that term familiar from ethics. On the distinction between deontological vs. teleological conceptions of epistemic justification, see Zagzebski (1996: 32-47).

<sup>2</sup> Foley (1999, 964)

<sup>3</sup> Traditionally internalism was motivated by the guidance conception of justification, so it arguably depends on voluntarism as well (Goldman 1999, 272–274). For this reason, opponents of voluntarism typically embrace some form of externalism (Alston 1988a; Plantinga 1993), or in the case of Feldman (2001; 2008), "mentalism"—a position that he describes as "internalist" though it is severed from the guidance conception. (See footnote 5.)

naturalness of the guidance conception is attested to by ordinary speakers' frequent talk about things we should and shouldn't believe.<sup>4</sup>

Some epistemologists (e.g., Richard Feldman) have attempted to accommodate this widespread way of speaking while dispensing with the guidance conception and voluntarism.<sup>5</sup> Others (e.g., John Heil and Robert Audi) defend the guidance conception by decoupling it from doxastic voluntarism: they maintain that epistemic guidance pertains primarily to acts of belief formation and only secondarily to beliefs themselves, because the acts are objects of choice whereas the beliefs are not.<sup>6</sup> There are also a few epistemologists (e.g., Pamela Hieronymi and Matthias Steup) who defend limited versions of doxastic voluntarism by emphasizing the symmetry between doxastic and practical freedom, and urging that the latest accounts of voluntary action can be applied to voluntarily formed beliefs.<sup>7</sup> Our aim in this paper is more ambitious: we defend a version of voluntarism according to which our beliefs are *chosen* in a robust sense. We focus on the control human beings have over the actions by which beliefs are formed and maintained, but (unlike Heil and Audi) we argue that such acts are partially constitutive of beliefs as mental states. It follows that choosing to perform the actions amounts to choosing beliefs in precisely the way that in which such choice is relevant to the guidance conception of epistemology.

Our notion of belief choice is markedly different from the one that Williams and Alston envision when they attack voluntarism. They focus on cases in which one entertains a specific proposition and then decides whether to accept or reject it, and we agree that conceived in this way,

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<sup>4</sup> For example, a popular book on finance tells its readers that "once a stock reaches your price target, unless you get new information [...] you shouldn't think the stock is going much higher" (Cramer and Mason (2006, 59)). In an essay about lesbianism, a teacher reports telling her students that "you shouldn't think that people are bad just because they're gay (Gillespie (1999: 171)). And a character in a 19th Century serial who wants his daughter to find a husband tells his friend, "That can't be you, Duke [...] I was wrong to think it could. One can't dispose of other people's hearts or indulge in cut-and-dried schemes for their futures" (Cook (1874: 159)). In each of these cases, a belief is censured for running afoul of some principle that the author thinks should guide people in the beliefs they accept about the relevant subject matter.

<sup>5</sup> Feldman (2001; 2008) argues that one is subject to certain obligations ("role 'oughts'") insofar as one fills a role, regardless of whether it is within one's power to discharge these obligations. One example Feldman gives is that teachers ought to clarify, and a teacher can be blamed for failing to do this, even if success is impossible to her (and even if the teacher has no choice about whether to be a teacher). Feldman may be right that there is a sense in which words like "ought" and "blame" can be applied in such cases, but, if so, they do not express prescriptions the point of which is to guide agents in action. Feldman (2008) is right that "role 'oughts'" provide norms on the same order as those concerning ways we ought to chew and breathe, even if we do not choose our roles as a chewer or breather. But these norms are akin to those describing how we "ought" to circulate our blood or conduct cellular metabolism. Since the "role 'oughts'" governing teachers are akin to the norms that apply to involuntary physiological processes, they are clearly not the sort of norms that provide guidance. In addition to these "oughts," teachers clearly do need norms to *guide* them in fulfilling their role: indeed, the whole discipline of pedagogy is concerned with such norms, and myriad books and courses that purport to provide them. So Feldman's examples of normative words being used in connection with things over which people have no choice, involve a different sense of these word than the one in which they are used both by traditional epistemologists and by the non-philosophers we quoted in the preceding note.

<sup>6</sup> According to Heil (1983) and Audi (2002), epistemology recommends certain procedures of gathering evidence, such as paying attention to logic, careful observation, identifying and scrutinizing the data on which a conclusion is based, etc., and these norms apply indirectly to belief states. See also Hilary Kornblith (1983) for a similar approach.

<sup>7</sup> Hieronymi (2006) distinguishes between "believing at will" and the voluntariness of our beliefs, conceding to Alston and Williams that we do not believe at will, but maintaining that our beliefs are nonetheless voluntary. Steup (2011) goes further and criticizes Alston's arguments directly, drawing on a compatibilist account of freedom. For other compatibilist accounts, see also Ryan (2003) and Jäger (2004), and Steup (2008). We reject this position because we think that compatibilism is subject to insuperable objections that are intensified when applied to doxastic freedom. See Bayer (unpublished [b]) for a critique of the reasons-responsiveness account of compatibilism, which Steup applies to doxastic freedom.

choosing one's beliefs is (at least usually) impossible. It is evident to introspection that one cannot simply elect to believe, for example, that Mussolini was a fine man or even that he was once leader of Italy. But to choose a belief is not necessarily to entertain a specific propositional content and assent to it. We will argue that beliefs can be chosen under descriptions which do not include their content, and that it is under these descriptions that they are epistemically choiceworthy or the reverse.

Our next two sections deal with Alston's argument: we show that it relies on an unduly narrow conception of belief choice, and we present an alternative account that allows for forms of belief choice that elude Alston's objections.<sup>8</sup> The subsequent section supports this account by developing the idea that belief states are partially constituted by a range of mental actions. In the final section, we explore the range of beliefs to which our account of belief choice applies.

## II. Alston's Argument against Doxastic Voluntarism

Alston (1988b) rejects voluntarism as psychologically implausible. He proceeds by setting up a taxonomy of ways in which an agent could control a state of affairs and then arguing that an agent cannot control his beliefs in any of the relevant ways.

Alston's first type of control is *basic voluntary control*—the sort of control one has over a state of affairs that one can here and now cause directly by choice, as one can cause one's index finger to move. Alston claims it is obvious that we cannot control our beliefs in this way. Like Williams, he assumes that to choose a belief in this way would mean entertaining a proposition and then electing to believe it.

An agent has *non-basic control* over a state of affairs if he has basic control over something that here and now causes the intended state of affairs, as one can flip off a switch by moving one's index finger. Alston contends we have no such control over our beliefs, because there is no "switch" that we can flip in order to change them.<sup>9</sup> He considers whether that switch might be the act of inquiry itself—the act of looking for reasons or evidence.<sup>10</sup> He concedes that we have basic voluntary control over this act, but he denies that this allows us to choose beliefs, because we cannot know which beliefs will result from the act of inquiry (and *a fortiori* we cannot intend these beliefs).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> We focus on Alston rather than Williams, because it is Alston who connects the question of belief choice to the issue of epistemic norms. Williams is concerned with the narrower question of whether it is possible to self-consciously adopt a belief for pragmatic reasons. Doing so would require choosing the belief under the description that includes the belief's content, and we agree that beliefs are not (ordinarily) chosen in this manner.

<sup>9</sup> Feldman (2001) later points out that if the proposition in question is "The switch has been flipped," then one can quite literally choose to flip a switch in order to choose a belief.

<sup>10</sup> This is a point originally suggested by Chisholm (1968).

<sup>11</sup> A similar point is made by Feldman (2008: 345) against a proposal raised by Kelly (2002). Hieronymi (2006) urges that by positively considering evidence that bears on *p*, we therein believe that *p*, and she argues that this constitutes a form of "evaluative control" that we exercise over our beliefs. Still, Hieronymi agrees with Alston that this does not count as a form of believing at will because she thinks that acting at will involves an immediate responsiveness to practical reasons that evaluative control does not involve. Central to her argument is the assumption that no practical reason can be a reason whose consideration constitutes believing. But, as Bayer (unpublished [a]) has shown, this last assumption is mistaken. The attitude one adopts toward a proposition is an expression of one's attitude towards the *practical value of believing the truth*.

An agent has *long-range voluntary control* over a state of affairs when he can accomplish something via a long-range project involving different directly voluntary actions, as one can control finger dexterity with finger exercises. Alston thinks we have some degree of control of this kind over our beliefs. To avoid believing *p*, we take such measures as avoiding evidence for *p*, seeking the company of those who reject *p*, etc. But he does not think that this gives us extensive control over most of the beliefs we take to be justified or unjustified, and so it cannot be the sort of control presupposed by the guidance conception of epistemology.<sup>12</sup>

The last type of control Alston considers is *indirect influence*. An agent is responsible for a state of affairs in this way when, although he had no intention to bring it about, it would not have come about were it not for some action he intentionally took. For example, a man can be held responsible for being overweight if he willingly eats a diet of junk food.<sup>13</sup> Alston thinks we can exert this sort of influence over many of our beliefs by, e.g., being careful to search for additional evidence for particular beliefs, or by developing a general habit of being critical of authority, but he doubts that such influence is adequate to underpin prescriptive epistemic norms.

Alston argues, in effect, that prescriptive epistemic norms would apply only to intentionally formed beliefs, not to beliefs merely indirectly influenced by acts we voluntarily control. But the candidate forms of intentional belief formation are either unreal or not extensive enough to correspond with the scope of our epistemic judgments. Therefore, none of the forms of control we might be thought to exercise over our beliefs are adequate to ground the guidance conception of epistemology.

In our next section, we argue that people exercise voluntary control over their beliefs by choosing the acts by which these beliefs are formed and maintained. If one accepts both our argument and Alston's taxonomy one would most likely classify this as non-basic voluntary control. However, the distinction between basic and non-basic control is problematic as applied to beliefs, because as we argue in Section IV, beliefs are not fully distinct from the mental actions that cause them.

### **III. Choosing Beliefs by Choosing Acts of Inquiry**

By virtue of our control over the act of inquiry, we can intentionally undertake to form a given belief. This choice can be interpreted as the choice to believe *de re* a proposition with a specific content. Though there is no choice to believe *de dicto* that specific proposition, there is a choice to believe *de*

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<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Hieronymi (2006) has distinguished believing at will from what she calls "managerial control," or the process acquiring a belief by placing oneself in a situation in which one is likely to form it. Unlike evaluative control, exercising this kind of control is responsive to practical reasons, but it counts merely as a kind of voluntarily *bringing about a belief*, not an act of *believing at will*.

<sup>13</sup> Indirect influence corresponds to what Pojman (1985) calls believing willingly, which he distinguishes from believing at will.

*dicto* a proposition that fits a description under which the belief is epistemically assessable, which is just what is required by the guidance conception of epistemology.

Alston argues that we might have non-basic voluntary control over our beliefs only if we ignore “the difference between doing A in order to bring about E, for some definite E, and doing A so that some effect within a certain range will ensue.” In order for an inquirer to have immediate voluntary control over propositional attitudes in the way we do over the positions of doors and light switches, the search for evidence would have to be undertaken with the intention of taking up an attitude toward a specific proposition (1988b, 271). Alston gives the example of someone who looks up Al Kaline’s lifetime batting average in a baseball almanac: he has the intention of forming some belief about the average, but not the specific belief that the average is .320.

But surely there is a significant sense in which the person intends to believe the *specific* proposition about the batting average that is attested to by the almanac, whatever it turns out to be. Far from intending merely to form *any old belief* about the average and coming to the one he does by chance, the inquirer opens the almanac on the premise that one and only one figure will be written next to Kaline’s name and with an intention to believe *of that figure* that it is Kaline’s lifetime batting average. Similarly, consider the case of a student asked to divide 276 by 12. Presently he has no belief of the form “ $276 \div 12 = X$ ,” but he can easily acquire one by going through the method of long division—a process which he knows will yield some determinate quotient, though he does not know in advance which. In choosing to execute the method, therefore, he chooses to form some determinate belief—namely the belief “ $276 \div 12 = 23$ ,” though at present he can only specify this belief *de dicto* through some such description as “The belief that results from long division of 276 by 12.”

In both cases, the methods of inquiry are known to yield unique beliefs and are enacted precisely for this reason. Granted, the subject cannot specify the content of these beliefs in advance, but why should this prevent him from intending to form those very beliefs? We frequently have intentions with regard to specific contentful items without knowing their specific content: for example, a job applicant who eagerly tears into an envelope from a prospective employer obviously intends to read the letter therein and does not already know what it says; similarly one can pick a specific card from a deck, though one does not know its face value. More generally: the identity of an object of choice is rarely exhausted by the description under which it is chosen, or even by the whole of the chooser’s knowledge of the object. (We frequently choose things that have characteristics about which we are unaware. Each donut in a bakery window has enumerable properties including a precise mass, chemical composition, and causal history, yet an agent’s ignorance of these does not prevent him from choosing one for his breakfast.) Alston, then, has not shown why, in choosing a method of inquiry, we do not choose a specific belief with a specific content *de re*—a belief that can be described *de dicto* as the result of a specific act of inquiry.

Given that beliefs have attributes besides content by which they may be chosen, in order to determine when we can be said to have chosen a belief in a way that makes us *epistemically*

*responsible for it*, we need to consider how the different attributes of beliefs relate to the reasons epistemologists have for evaluating some beliefs as better than others. Only if the features by virtue of which we knowingly choose our beliefs are epistemically relevant can we regard the choice as epistemically responsible or not.

Alston ignores this issue by treating all cases of choosing incompletely known objects as cases of being “responsible for taking up some attitude or other toward some proposition within a given range” marked out by the features that one does know (1988b: 272). But this is clearly wrong even outside of the case of belief. Consider his own example of a servant who is given instructions by an employer to operate a computer that opens and closes household doors. According to Alston, the servant cannot intentionally open or close a door, but can only “actuate the relevant program and let things take their course.” The servant, Alston thinks, is “responsible for the doors’ assuming whatever position [the employer] specified” (as we might be “responsible for taking up some attitude or other towards a proposition within a given range”) but he is *not* “responsible for the front door’s being open rather than closed.” For this reason he claims we should not praise or blame the servant for the door’s specifically being open (1988b, 272).

Alston acknowledges that the servant is responsible for the door’s succeeding or failing to be in the state intended by his employer. But this state is *in fact* either that of being open or being closed. Suppose the employer intends the door to be closed. If, because the servant fails to actuate the program, the door remains open and the dog escapes, then the servant is to blame for this. His job is to actuate the program, and although he doesn’t know that the program will close the relevant door, he does know that it will affect the states of all the doors in the house in one and only one way, that these states have consequences, and that the employer, in making decisions such as whether or not to let the dog out of its cage, may be counting on the door’s being in the position specified by the program.<sup>14</sup> What the servant chooses and is responsible for is not just that the door be in some position or other, but that it be in the very position specified by the employer.

Of course we are not praise- or blameworthy for *every* feature of every object we choose. For example in drawing straws, someone who draws the leftmost straw and finds that it is the short one, cannot be blamed for having drawn the short straw. How does this case differ from the two just discussed? The feature by virtue of which the relevant straw is bad (given the rules of the game) is its shortness, which is unknown to the player, rather than its being leftmost, and there is no knowable connection between position (or any other feature the player is aware of) and shortness. This is

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<sup>14</sup> This last point, which is important, is obscured in Alston’s example because we are told nothing about the employer’s reason for writing the program—he is treated as some sort of eccentric; but in fact there are many jobs that are essentially like the one Alston describes. For example, the person who sits behind the lighting console in a Broadway theatre, presses buttons on the console at certain points during the play, the buttons initiate programs that turn on and off dozens of lights and alter their brightness. These programs were written by the lighting designer and the person behind the console likely doesn’t know the effect of his action on each individual light. Nonetheless, he knows that if he doesn’t press the buttons when he should, the lighting will be wrong, and that it will be his fault if, because of this, the lead has to deliver a soliloquy in a shadow.

because the whole point of drawing straws is that the goodness or badness of the outcome is random with respect to what the player chooses. The case of the servant actuating the program is like this case only in that there is something about the outcome of his action that he does not know. However, the feature that makes one configuration of doors preferable to the others is its being specified by the employer, and the servant knows that this is precisely the configuration that will result from his actuating the program. From the point of view of the servant's job, the relevant configuration is good not by virtue of having (e.g.) the bedroom door closed and the kitchen door open, but by virtue of being the configuration specified in the employer's program. And it is precisely by virtue of being this configuration that the servant chooses it.

The same point applies in the cases of believing that Al Kaline's lifetime batting average is .320. Epistemological praise or blame attaches to this belief not insofar as it has the content it does, but rather by virtue of its being (or failing to be) well supported by an authoritative source. The subject choosing to consult the almanac does not know which statistic he will arrive at, but he does know that the resulting belief about the statistic will have the authority of the almanac, which we can suppose he knows to be reliable. If so, then he chooses the belief in light of what makes it epistemologically praiseworthy, and he is responsible for the belief's epistemologically good characteristics.<sup>15</sup>

This conception of doxastic choice and epistemic responsibility is not limited to beliefs formed by known methods or algorithms. In most cases both the choice and implementation of a method include innumerable choices of detail, many of them made implicitly without a well-defined method. Nevertheless, in all these cases we make these choices for the sake of deriving a conclusion that is specific (though we are unable at the time able to specify it by its content).<sup>16</sup>

So far, we have mainly addressed Alston's contention that choice of the method of inquiry cannot count as the choice of belief, as long as the outcome of inquiry is unknown to the inquirer. We have responded that there are many contentful states chosen without advance knowledge of the content, by reference to other features, and we have suggested that beliefs have, in addition to their contents, other features on the basis of which they might be chosen, and we have argued that among these features are the ones that are relevant to a belief's epistemic evaluation.

In particular, we have argued that beliefs can be chosen in a way that is analogous to the ways in which other contentful items are chosen by agents who without knowing their content, know

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<sup>15</sup> Notice that the outcome of the choice is not the primary object of *epistemological* evaluation. This might be obscured by the fact that we can evaluate the subject's beliefs *merely* on the grounds of their truth or falsehood. In the case of the servant employed to actuate the program opening and closing doors, the analogy to a well-supported but false belief would be a situation in which the servant runs the program, but (owing to a mistake in the instructions or a bug in the program) the doors end up in an undesirable configuration and the dog escapes. The dog's escape, like the false belief, is bad. But this is irrelevant to our assessment of the servant as an employee. He did his job impeccably and (let us suppose) could not have prevented the escape. Similarly in the case of the well-supported but false belief, if the subject did his "job" as a thinker impeccably, he is not responsible for the false belief that he could not have prevented (or could not have prevented without taking special precautions that would have been unwarranted).

<sup>16</sup> In cases in which we do not make these choices with this goal in mind, we may form an *unjustified* belief.

something else about the items that uniquely specifies them. In the case of beliefs, what is known when the choice is made is the act of inquiry that leads uniquely to the belief in question. Some readers may find it unnatural to think of a belief's origin in a particular act of inquiry as a feature by specifying which an agent can choose a belief. There is a temptation to conclude (with Heil and Audi) that, though we do have the sort of responsibility that the guidance conception requires, what we choose is not beliefs, but only acts of belief-formation. To defend our stronger claim, we will now argue that belief states are partially constituted by mental actions.

#### IV. Mental Actions as Constituents of Belief States

It is possible to have different mental states with the same content. For example: one can believe that it's raining or hope or fear that it might be; and one can see a particular elephant or imagine it or love it.<sup>17</sup> Even when both the object and the broad type of mental state are the same, mental states can differ. For example, we can desire an object more or less intensely or in a healthy or neurotic manner. Similarly two beliefs with the same content can differ as mental states. Consider two people who believe that low carbohydrate diets are a healthy short-term way to lose weight. The first believes this because he heard it from a co-worker; the second believes it because she is a researcher who has conducted an extensive study of the issue. The two people have similar mental states, and in many contexts we would legitimately describe the people as holding the "same belief." But in addition to *what* one believes, there is *how* one believes it—for example, how strongly one believes it, how interrelated it is with other mental states (both motivational and cognitive), and how sensitive it is to incoming evidence. How one believes a proposition is more relevant to one's epistemic responsibility than is the proposition itself. And the *manner* of a belief is inextricably linked to the mental actions by which the beliefs are formed and (we should now add) maintained. Notice that people regularly evaluate beliefs by how they are formed and maintained: if a true belief is formed on the basis of hearsay or maintained in defiance of counterevidence, the *belief* is described as unjustified.

To return to our two believers in the low-carb diet: they differ from each other in the degree of commitment each has to the belief, in the kinds of implications each will draw from it, in the manner in which each will integrate it with new evidence, in the circumstances under which each would revise it, and (therefore) in the way each will act upon it. The same content will function quite differently in the mental lives of these two people, and these differences in functioning result from (perhaps among other factors) the differences in the manners in which the beliefs were formed. Since

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<sup>17</sup> On certain theories, such mental states reduce to attitudes towards propositions. Though we disagree with such views, nothing here turns on the question of whether all content is propositional and all contentful states are propositional attitudes. Our point is simply that a mental state's identity is not exhausted by its content. This view is compatible with a variety of views of the nature of states and their content.

the uncritical agent's belief is based wholly on his coworker's say-so, his understanding of the requirements of the diet will be vaguer than the scientist's and this will be reflected in differing dietary decisions (based on the belief). The scientist will likely be more self-conscious of her degree of confidence in the belief and will take this into account when acting on (or inferring from) it, whereas the uncritical believer will not do this or will do it in a far more approximate way. And the scientist will probably be more sensitive to evidence, maintaining or revising her belief accordingly, whereas the uncritical believer is more likely to simply follow the fads.

The policy one adopts towards new evidence bearing on a belief is a continuation (or in some cases a reversal) of the action by which one initially formed the belief, and it is a crucial part of the *believing*. One can remain open to new evidence, and reconsider a belief in light of it when it arises; one can actively seek out new evidence; or, one can actively work to insulate a belief. Suppose, for example, that the researcher encounters a published study indicating that subjects losing weight quickly from the low-carb diet have difficulty keeping it off. She now faces a choice: Does the researcher dogmatically look for a way to insulate her belief from this new evidence, or does she take it into account, qualifying her belief if necessary?

It is not only in the case of dealing with counter-evidence that maintaining a belief requires mental action. A belief is something that one relies on as a premise in both theoretical and practical reasoning, and the very act of using it as a premise generates evidence that tests its truth, so believing something creates occasions for reevaluating its truth, which requires ongoing mental activity, much of it chosen.<sup>18</sup>

Since a pattern of action over time is essential to a belief, it is misleading to treat the content and the process as wholly distinct items and to inquire, as Alston does, into the causal relation between them.<sup>19</sup> More generally, it is a mistake to think that states are always wholly distinct from the processes by which they come to be and are maintained. An army's state of readiness is partially constituted by such actions as the patrolling the periphery of the camp, and an animal's state of health consists in the ongoing performance of myriad actions (blood circulation, cellular metabolism, etc.). The same is true of mental states, including (we've argued) beliefs.

So far we have been speaking of individual beliefs as discrete mental states, each of which involves voluntary actions distinct from those involved in other beliefs. This is a simplification: some of the actions involved in one belief will also be involved in others. For example, testing one belief involves testing its auxiliary hypotheses. Our beliefs are intricately interconnected and can be difficult

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<sup>18</sup> This position should not be confused with a pragmatism on which the *content* of the belief is somehow constituted by the activities in which the believing consists. For all we have said the content may exist mind-independently, and indeed (for the most part) we think that it does. Our point is only that the state of *believing* this content—of standing in a certain relation to it—is a complex one and is (at least partially) constituted by actions taken over time. The state of belief is like that of balancing a stick, which involves a succession of small actions. These actions are partially constitutive of the balancing, but (of course) they are in no way constitutive of the stick (which is analogous to the content of the belief.)

<sup>19</sup> For the same reason, Heil's and Audi's distinction between states of belief and acts of belief-formation is artificial.

to individuate.<sup>20</sup> This poses no obstacle to what we have said about how beliefs are chosen. There are similar ambiguities in individuating all sorts of uncontroversially voluntary actions and states. Consider the case of a drummer playing a complex pattern. One can think of him as playing a single complex rhythm, or as playing several simple rhythms, each of which is produced by a complex activity. If we take the latter view, we will find that many of his bodily movements play a role in producing more than one of the rhythms, but this doesn't change the fact that each of the simple rhythms is voluntary, as is the complex rhythm they comprise. Similarly, the complex activity of forming and maintaining a single belief is voluntary, even when that activity overlaps with the activity of forming and maintaining other beliefs.

As we shall see in our next section, considerations about the interconnectedness of our beliefs may account for how we choose many of our beliefs, even when we don't think of ourselves as intending to form each and every one of them. Even when we are not seeking to answer specific questions, we are nevertheless constantly confronted by mental managerial choices. Each of us, in every moment and in regard to every thought that crosses his mind, is confronted with choices about whether to raise or lower our level of attention and where to direct it, about when to initiate and sustain processes of inquiry and how to deal with tensions between beliefs (or between old beliefs and new information) when they occur.<sup>21</sup> In making each of these choices, a person may choose numerous beliefs.

## V. The Scope of Voluntary Control over Beliefs

The preceding is an account of how we choose our beliefs. But a significant question remains: are *all* beliefs chosen in this way? We have suggested that more cases of belief are like the almanac example than might have been obvious. While few of our beliefs are formed individually through algorithms enacted for the purpose of answering discrete questions, the acquisition and maintenance of at least many of our other beliefs depends on how we choose to conduct our cognition. But is this true of all beliefs? The most likely exceptions are perceptual judgments, e.g.: "This is table," "It's brown," etc. (Alston, who emphasizes such judgments, claims that they constitute the majority of our beliefs.) Other plausible exceptions are various everyday inductive inferences, the acceptance of testimony on

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<sup>20</sup> Clifford (1901, 168–69) nicely describes this phenomenon when he says that each belief is "part of that aggregate of beliefs which is the link between sensation and action at every moment of all our lives, and which is so organized and compacted together that no part of it can be isolated from the rest, but every new addition modifies the structure of the whole. No real belief, however trifling and fragmentary it may seem, is ever truly insignificant; it prepares us to receive more of its like, confirms those which resembled it before, and weakens others; and so gradually it lays a stealthy train in our inmost thoughts, which may some day explode into overt action, and leave its stamp upon our character forever." Such considerations about the interconnectedness of our beliefs are often cited in support of holism about semantic content. However, one can acknowledge the force of these considerations (as we do) without believing in semantic holism, so long as one does not identify the content of the belief with its function.

<sup>21</sup> See Harry Binswanger (1992).

face value, simple introspective judgments, and the belief in certain mathematical or logical truths. We will only have space to address the question about perceptual beliefs in any detail, but we believe our answer can be adapted to the other examples.

Before we go any further, we should note that if there is a class of beliefs that is unchosen and a class that is chosen, this distinction will be fundamental to epistemology. The chosen beliefs will be subject to epistemic guidance, whereas the unchosen ones will be warranted (if at all) in some other sense. Epistemologies might develop in different directions from this starting point, perhaps inducing us to skepticism about the unchosen beliefs until they can be founded on chosen ones, or else treating them as unjustified justifiers. For our part, however, we do not think that any beliefs are *entirely* unchosen.

We began by considering beliefs formed by deliberate inquiry, in which a method is self-consciously applied in search of new knowledge. But in (at least many) other cases, beliefs are (or ought to be) formed with some sensitivity to the need for method and standards. Instead of opening an almanac with the goal of discovering a certain batting average, one might find the almanac open and notice the average. In this case, a reasonable person is likely to believe what he reads, whereas he would not believe something he notices on the cover of *The National Enquirer*, because he knows that such almanacs are reliable and that tabloids are not. Here the act of belief formation is automatic and habitual rather than deliberate, but the habit reflects the agent's general goal of forming (only) beliefs that are supported in a certain way and his past deliberate acts of inquiry and self-criticism. It qualifies as chosen (and the agent qualifies as responsible for it) in the same way as does a morally virtuous action taken from habit. Similarly an agent who believes *The National Enquirer* deserves epistemic blame both for being credulous in general but also for the specific beliefs he forms and maintains by giving credence to specific unreliable sources on specific occasions. Each of his beliefs is blameworthy not insofar as it has the specific content it does, but rather insofar as it is formed (and maintained) in an epistemically bad way. Moreover, the credence that the agent assigns to the various sources is conditioned by his general beliefs about the standards for evaluating testimony and his beliefs about the particular sources involved, so the complex process by which each testimony-based belief is formed includes the processes by which these beliefs are formed and maintained.

The preceding example concerns beliefs based on testimony; similar points can be made about perceptual judgments. Someone who knows he is at a magic show would not form the beliefs he otherwise might about solidity of solid-looking hoops or the continuity of a seemingly bifurcated woman.<sup>22</sup> Thus perceptual beliefs depend on other beliefs and on the choices involved in their formation and perpetuation. According to some theories of perception and concept formation, there

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<sup>22</sup> Alston counts checking to make sure a perceptual situation is normal as a type of voluntary influence that we have over our beliefs. But we have already argued that many of these "influences" are actually constitutive of believing.

are further roles for choice in perceptual judgment.<sup>23</sup> On any view, these beliefs involve less choice than we think is involved in accepting a scientific theory or reaching a verdict in a trial, but this is to be expected: choice, where present, leads to heightened concerns about justification and to a need for method. We should expect these features to be less pronounced in the case of beliefs (such as perceptual judgments) that are justified even in the minds of the least sophisticated agents (e.g., small children). Such beliefs serve as the premises for the sort of beliefs with respect to which we need more epistemological guidance because choice plays a larger role.

There surely is *something* intimately related to perceptual beliefs over which one has no choice. The relationship between that unchosen thing and the beliefs is epistemologically significant. Is the relationship one of identity? Of justification? Of exculpation?<sup>24</sup> This is a substantive question for epistemology and it is well beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>25</sup> But however this question is to be answered, it is clear that the relationship between perceptual judgments and the unchosen element is quite close, and that significantly less choice is involved in these judgments than is involved in, e.g., scientific theories or verdicts in murder trials.

But, however limited and qualified the control we have over our perceptual judgments may be, we suggest that it is the type of control required by traditional epistemology and thought impossible by Alston and others. In any event, perceptual judgments are a limiting case of beliefs, and even if our suggestion about them fails, we think we have shown how many other beliefs can be, and indeed *are* chosen. It is these other beliefs about which we are most in need of epistemological advice, and we can be held responsible for following or failing to follow this advice, just as the guidance conception of epistemology assumes.

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<sup>23</sup> In an underappreciated portion of his Essay, Locke observes that we have a choice to “employ or withhold our faculties”: each of us must choose “whether he will curiously survey” the objects of perception, and whether he will “with an intent application, endeavour to observe accurately all that is visible in it.” More recently, research on perception, in the tradition of J.J. Gibson has sensitized us to the variety and complexity of the activities that are involved in perceiving, and some of these activities (e.g. focusing our attention on one aspect of our sensory field rather than another) seem to be (at least often) under our direct control. (See Gibson (1986), Noë (2006) on the activity of perception; see Crowther (2009) for an account of how treating perception as “agential” is nonetheless consistent with its being metaphysically passive in the way needed for it to serve as a form of evidence.) Perceptual judgments include, in addition to the act of perception itself, the application of concepts. There are arguments from many quarters that the application and formation of concepts in response to sensory data is a complex process that involves voluntary components. See Brandom (1994, 85-89, 132-136; 2000, 163–5), Sloutsky (2003), Bayer (2011), Gotthelf (2013), Salmieri (2013).

<sup>24</sup> To borrow a phrase from McDowell.

<sup>25</sup> Each of us has addressed this question at length elsewhere. See Bayer (2011) and Salmieri (2013).

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