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Nottelmann, Nikolaj

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Against A Descriptive Vindication Of Doxastic Voluntarism.¹

Nikolaj Nottelmann

Abstract In this paper, I examine whether doxastic voluntarism should be taken seriously within normative doxastic ethics. First, I show that currently the psychological evidence does not positively support doxastic voluntarism, even if I accept recent conclusions by Matthias Steup that the relevant evidence does not decisively undermine voluntarism either. Thus, it would seem that normative doxastic ethics could not justifiably appeal directly to voluntarist assumptions. Second, I attempt to bring out how doxastic voluntarists may nevertheless hope to stir methodological worries within normative doxastic ethics, should they demonstrate that our typical practices of deontically evaluating doxastic states crucially rely on voluntarist assumptions. I also argue that some of the key arguments thought positively to support voluntarism as a psychological thesis may be put to better effect in the context of this kind of descriptive vindication. However, a closer examination reveals that nothing obviously suggests that voluntarism provides a better regimentation of our ascription practices as compared to rival theses concerning human powers of doxastic control.

Keywords Alston, W. – Belief - Clifford, W.K. - Doxastic Blameworthiness – Doxastic Control - Doxastic Ethics – Doxastic Voluntarism – Steup, M. – Strawson, P. - Voluntary Control.

1. Introduction

Central debates within modern doxastic ethics were molded in the forge of fierce normative dispute. W.K. Clifford's brash insistence that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence"² clashed against William James' rejoinder that "our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds"³. In the disputants' eyes the stakes were certainly high here, since, said Clifford, living by James' advice would risk committing "one long sin against mankind"⁴, whereas according to James adhering by Clifford's rule would mean foregoing "all important transactions of life"⁵!

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² Clifford(1999, 77).

³ James(1956, 11).

⁴ Clifford(1999, 77).

⁵ James(1956, 31).

Since the Victorian Age, various disputants have continued debating the ethics of belief, refining and expanding the relevant normative issues in many sophisticated ways⁶, even if arguably few have matched Clifford and James in rhetorical fervor.

A different strand in the ethics of belief debates concerns the semantics of typical expressions made use of in normative debates, e.g. “blameworthy belief”, “epistemic permissibility”, “intellectual obligation” etc. Also, several publications have examined psychological claims and principles often appealed to within normative debates, e.g. relating to the modes of control typical human agents enjoy over their doxastic states.

In parts of this paper I investigate a different approach to doxastic ethics, which to my knowledge has been widely neglected⁷. This approach involves an effort toward describing key features of our typical practices of asserting and justifying doxastic blame and praise⁸ ascriptions as well as the shared assumptions underlying those practices, while bracketing (1) the normative question whether those practices are ultimately fair and just, as well as (2) the empirical question whether the psychological assumptions underlying that practice are true. My purpose with this investigation shall be an examination of the question, whether doxastic voluntarism (henceforth: DV) may be characterized as a shared background assumption underlying (in some philosophically relevant sense) our actual practices of blaming or praising agents on account of their doxastic states. Ultimately, I conclude that nothing obviously suggests answering that question in the positive.

Before embarking on that project, however, I shall attempt to make clear that as a psychological thesis DV suffers from a conspicuous absence of relevant positive psychological evidence, even if, at least in some of its versions, it may successfully dodge the most influential philosophical arguments levelled against it. Thus, it would seem that any **normative** doxastic ethics founded upon DV faces a serious justificatory problem. Yet, within a (normatively agnostic) **descriptivist** approach to doxastic ethics as outlined above, nevertheless DV may attempt a comeback: Many typical ascriptions of doxastic blame may naturally be

⁶ In this paper I shall conceive of normative doxastic ethics as the discipline treating on the question when, and under which conditions, agents are blame- or praiseworthy on account of their doxastic states. The literature here is comprehensive. One representative sample is Steup(1988) arguing, pace the seminal Alston(1989), that medieval witchcraft believers may rightfully be blamed for their irrational beliefs under the relevant historical circumstances. Nottelmann(2007) is strongly rooted in that tradition of normative debate.

⁷ A notable exception is Woudenberg(2009), presenting comprehensive empirical evidence that talk about epistemic obligations and equivalent notions is fairly widespread in our practices.

⁸ Below I shall talk of doxastic blame and praise ascription practices, without discussing whether asymmetric concerns apply here. Debating whether e.g. praise ascription makes underlying control assumptions different from blame ascription would take me too far off track in the present context. Thus, sometimes, for ease of presentation, I shall talk of doxastic blame ascription only, tacitly supposing that parallel concerns apply to praise ascription.

described as blaming the agent for having **decided** to believe the relevant content. And exculpations from apparent doxastic blame may seemingly turn on judging that the relevant belief simply **was not up to the agent**. Apparently then, a case can be made that actual widespread and deeply entrenched practices of doxastic blame ascription do in fact turn on the underlying assumption that “we have about the same kind of control over what we believe as we have over what we do” (This is Matthias Steup’s initial characterization of DV in a recent *Synthese* paper⁹). If this be the case, it could be argued that at the very least voluntarists like Steup have managed to make explicit resilient pragmatic commitments to DV following from our typical doxastic blame ascription practices (much more about the relevant kind of argument will be said in section 5.1 below).

Importantly, my argument below does not suppose that voluntarists like Steup would be satisfied with a victory on descriptivist terms (e.g., certainly Steup has demonstrated on many occasions his willingness to derive strong normative conclusions from his views regarding doxastic control¹⁰). Rather my claim is that those descriptivist terms seem to offer DV its best chance of defeating rival conceptions of doxastic control. Arguably, even such a victory would have severe implications for normative doxastic ethics. We would then face the situation that our actual doxastic blame ascription practices commit us to very dubious empirical assumptions (namely DV). This would cast doubt on appeals to such practices in the process of justifying claims within normative doxastic ethics. Arguably, we would also have to treat with great caution our normative intuitions with regard to doxastic blame ascriptions, insofar as they may well be shaped by our commitments to such dubious assumptions. Thus a justificatory crisis within normative doxastic ethics would arise: It is hard to see how we could get a substantial well-grounded doxastic ethics off the ground, if we admit that our relevant practices and intuitions are decisively framed by psychological assumptions not positively supported by our evidence.

Thus, it is of some relevance to normative doxastic ethics, whether DV does in fact offer the best account of the psychological assumptions underlying our typical doxastic blame ascription practices. As already mentioned, in the present paper I shall conclude that nothing obviously suggest that DV **does** offer such an account: In fact the Indirect Control View (Henceforth: IC) - i.e. the view that our doxastic states are never formed intentionally, but may at least sometimes be formed as a **consequence** of intentional action - accounts for our practices at least equally well. It shall take some footwork to reach that conclusion. In preparation for the central arguments, I shall proceed to make more explicit the import of DV.

⁹ Steup(2012, 145).

¹⁰ See e.g. Steup(1988).

2. Doxastic voluntarism.

Historically, DV has come in two very different forms, what Robert Audi has termed the “genetic” and the “behavioral” versions of DV. According to the former, at least sometimes doxastic events like belief formation are under direct voluntary control in the same sense as are simple actions like raising one’s arm. Here, forming or abandoning a belief is seen as something we may intentionally do. According to the latter version of DV, at least sometimes believing itself is some kind of prolonged intentional doing, akin to swimming or taking a walk.¹¹ It should be obvious that genetic DV does not imply behavioral DV: Even if sometimes I may intentionally form a belief, its persistence need never be up to me. For illustration: I may be said to be in control over the lighting in a room, since it is up to me whether the room’s light switch is in the on - or the off position. Still, it may be up to external factors (such as the power supply), whether the lighting of the room stays on, after I have left the switch in its “on” position. Whether behavioral DV implies genetic DV is a trickier issue, but luckily this question need not concern us here: Behavioral DV has had very few adherents in the philosophical literature, and for good reasons. It is not obvious why believing or disbelieving a proposition should be seen as some kind of prolonged action¹². In contrast, as I shall acknowledge below, serious arguments may be offered in support of genetic DV.¹³ Henceforth I shall use “DV” to denote genetic DV, and leave behavioral DV behind.

DV is a psychological thesis about human mental powers. Yet, it has rarely been debated outside the context of doxastic ethics.¹⁴ Indeed, a central appeal of DV is its obvious potential for grounding ascriptions of doxastic praise and blame: If I am to blame for intentionally forming (or not abandoning) some belief, arguably I may also be blamed for holding it. If I am to praise for intentionally forming (or not abandoning) some belief, arguably I may also be praised for holding it. Certainly, this is a simple and elegant account. In contrast, doxastic involuntarists face a difficult task explaining how (or if) ascriptions of doxastic blame and

¹¹ See Audi(2001, 94).

¹² Or so I shall presume here. Of course, certain patterns of prolonged action may be characteristic of certain beliefs. If, e.g., I am a ship-wrecked swimmer believing that I may find safety on a beach in front of me, I will be disposed to swim towards that beach, if nothing prevents me from doing it. Also, beliefs may often bear on my patterns of evidence-gathering behavior etc. But this does not show in any way that beliefs themselves should be understood as prolonged action patterns. Recently, Matthew Boyle has argued that in a rational subject belief is an “active condition”, involving an “actualization of his power to be persuaded by reasons” (2011, 22). However, Boyle also makes clear that this kind of activity is not to be understood on a par with ordinary patterns of action.

¹³ James(1981) has sometimes been taken a proponent of behavioral DV. See e.g. Gale(1999, 71). Also, in some writings Steup has offered characterizations of DV, which in isolation would naturally be read in the behavioral way, e.g. “...there are positive reasons for the view that having beliefs is a form of agency” (1988, 76). However, saddling Steup with behavioral DV would be uncharitable, insofar as clearly all his published arguments have been concerned with genetic DV. See also Nottelmann(2007) for an extended discussion of DV in its various versions.

¹⁴ Thus, even if Steup(2012) takes great care not to mix ethical assumptions into his defense of DV, not surprisingly he refers heavily to the modern literature on doxastic ethics, not least Alston(1989) and its purported debunking of any attempt at analyzing epistemic justification as belief blameless on a DV account . See also Nottelmann(2013).

praise are ever appropriate. E.g. proponents of IC must make clear the precise connection between belief-influencing actions and the blame- or praiseworthiness of the doxastic states to which they give rise. Several articles and studies have undertaken this challenge, which shall not concern me further in this context.¹⁵ Suffice it to say that arguably rival accounts of the grounds of doxastic blame and praise have yet to match DV in terms of elegance. Thus, DV is not without explanatory virtues. Focusing on those virtues, however, may easily take our eyes off the important concerns treated in this paper. Below, then, I shall focus strictly on DV's standing as a psychological thesis.

For the sake of precision, we may also distinguish between various modal strengths of DV. E.g. we could line up the following varieties:

Strong actualist DV: Voluntary belief-formations¹⁶ occur in the actual world (past, present, future) in the lives of typical people (i.e. people without any kind of rare mental powers.)

Weak actualist DV: Voluntary belief-formations occur in the actual world, but only in the lives of people with rare mental powers (perhaps specially trained Tibetan monks, or the like)

Strong possibilist DV: Voluntary belief-formations could possibly occur in the actual lives of typical people.

Weak possibilist DV: Voluntary belief-formations could possibly occur (but would require atypical mental powers).

It should be clear from the discussion below that Steup endorses a strong actualist version of (genetic) DV. Steup's preferred version of DV could even be called "super-strong", in so far as he regards voluntary belief formations as entirely **common** and unsurprising occurrences in the lives of ordinary people, everyday episodes with which we are all deeply familiar; so bland that we hardly ever reflect on them outside of academic contexts¹⁷. In section (3) below, I shall argue that Steup has not presented convincing positive evidence in favor of that version of DV (the difference between strong and "super-strong" versions of actualist DV will not prove relevant).

¹⁵ The literature is extensive here. See e.g. Nottelmann(2007), Peels(2012), and the bibliographies of those studies.

¹⁶ "Belief-formation" here is really a dummy for an entire range of doxastic events, which could be claimed to be under direct voluntary control. See Nottelmann(2007, Chapt. 7.3.). For ease of presentation, here I follow convention and focus on belief-formation.

¹⁷ It should be noted that Steup's DV is not "super-strong" in the sense that he endorses "ultimate control" over belief-formations, e.g. the kind of control we would have, if not only were our beliefs under the control of our wills, but the direction of our wills were also subject to our control. Steup remains agnostic here. I owe this explication to personal correspondence with Steup.

Throughout the paper I shall ignore all versions of DV different from the strong actualist one. This is not only for the obvious reason that an in-depth discussion of all DV versions would take up too much space. Also, it seems clear that weaker versions of DV are of marginal relevance to normative doxastic ethics, however theoretically interesting they may be in their own right. Mere possibilist versions of DV, e.g., cannot ground actual doxastic blame ascriptions¹⁸. And it is far from clear which positive evidence we have for weak actualist DV in the absence of positive evidence for the strong actualist version. At least to my knowledge, no-one in the philosophical literature has seriously attempted to present evidence for the existence of the required kind of doxastic prodigy.

3. Steup against doxastic involuntarism.

In this section I shall argue that DV is not well-supported as a thesis about typical human psychology. I do this by countering Matthias Steup's sophisticated arguments to the contrary conclusion. As shall become clear, Steup's recent arguments absorb and concentrate the force of many previous arguments. Readers already firmly convinced of involuntarism may want to skip this section entirely. To them, descriptive vindication is all DV could hope for in any case. Yet, all other readers may well wish for an argument, or at least a firmer understanding, why this is so.

In 1989 William Alston famously posed a fundamental challenge to DV:

My argument, if it can be called that, simply consists in asking you to consider whether you have any such powers. Can you at this moment, start to believe that the United States is still a colony of Great Britain, just by deciding to do so?¹⁹

An obvious line of reply to this kind of argument would concede that Alston is perfectly right as far as go "normal perceptual, introspective, and memory propositions"²⁰, the types of belief content Alston initially targets. But DV may rest its case on beliefs outside of those domains. Thus Carl Ginet:

¹⁸ In the literature, a few authors have presented arguments **against** weak possibilist genetic DV. For this DV version, a distinction between psychological and conceptual possibility claims becomes salient. Famous defenses of the conceptual impossibility of DV include Williams(1973) and O'Shaughnessy(1980). Dion Scott-Kakures has even contended that it is part of belief's essence not to be subject to direct voluntary influence: "Nothing could be a belief and be willed directly" (1993, 77). Those arguments raise many contentious issues. If successful, obviously they would take down all versions of DV in their wake. However, as I argue at length in Nottelmann(2007, Chapt 8.2.1), it is far from clear that individually or collectively they manage to establish the case for the necessary falsehood of DV.

¹⁹ Alston(1989, 122)

²⁰ Alston(1989, 129)

It is fairly clear that in the large mass of beliefs held by any normal person at a given time, the overwhelmingly major part will have come about involuntarily and only a small portion will have been adopted voluntarily (by decision)".²¹

Steup, however, adopts a more radical strategy against Alston. Rather than muse over how much doxastic territory DV may safely concede to the involuntarist, he points to a basic flaw in Alston's argument: Briefly, Alston's demonstration of our inability intentionally to form beliefs with certain contents under certain circumstances (evidential, environmental etc.), does not show for any of the beliefs that we have in fact managed to form that they were not formed intentionally. When in a certain situation we are unable to do something, very often it is because it is psychologically impossible for us to form a relevant intention under the circumstances. Here we lack what Steup prefers to call "volitional control": The circumstances psychologically do not permit us to intend the relevant outcome. To put Steup's basic point in slightly morbid terms: The fact that under almost any circumstances we are unable to form the intention to kill ourselves, does not demonstrate that suicides (intentional self-killings) never occur.

I shall simply concede to Steup that when we find ourselves unable intentionally to form a belief it is due to a lack of relevant "volitional control".²² Ultimately it is far more important to doxastic ethics, whether at least some of our actual beliefs were formed intentionally. After all, it is this contention, which is supposed to ground a distinctive voluntarist account of the grounds of actual doxastic blameworthiness and praiseworthiness. Steup's deft counter to Alston's argument is highly valuable to the debate over DV, in so far as it succeeds in bringing this issue back to the forefront. Unfortunately, however, Steup's argument that some beliefs were in fact so formed carries much less conviction than his rebuttal of Alston's involuntarist arguments. Or so I shall argue below.

Why should we even begin to think that some of our beliefs were formed intentionally? Steup spends considerable effort trying to convince us that this matter is far from trivially settled in the involuntarist's favor. His rejoinder to Alston is only part of his general strategy here. Once, *pace* Alston, our focus is properly adjusted on the beliefs we have in fact formed (rather than those we could not form), Steup argues that nothing obviously suggests that none of those beliefs were formed intentionally.

First, the involuntarist may protest here that doxastic events like belief-formations are unintentional since they do not carry out "prior conscious intentions"²³ to perform them. This argument, however, founders on

²¹ Ginet(2001, 70)

²² Section 4 of Steup(2012) offers five argument that the conceded "volitional explanation" of such inability is the right one.

²³ See Steup(2012, 154)

the observation that clearly many of our intentional actions are not connected to prior conscious intentions. Things like shifting from the second to third gear while driving to work in a familiar car, is something we normally do without giving it any conscious thought. Nevertheless, such doings seem to be perfectly intentional, very different from unintentional occurrences like food digestion or typical finger twitchings²⁴.

Second, the involuntarist might try to rest her case on the alleged fact that doxastic events like belief-formation **never** have any conjoining phenomenology of the type characteristic of intentional action, no “feeling of willfulness”, no “experience of control”²⁵. However, this argument appear to have little force, if it is conceded that in general intentional action does not have a very distinctive phenomenological profile. Many intentional doings, like typical instances of turning a doorknob or unscrewing a toothpaste cap before tooth brushing, would not seem to be conjoined with any distinctive experience at all. Further, as Steup argues, beliefs may in fact be conjoined with a certain experience of control, at least sometimes “I experience myself as being responsive to the evidence that bears on the truth of what I believe.”²⁶ Why is not this “experience of control” enough to dispel the involuntarist’s worries?

An involuntarist rejoinder at this stage of the argument could be this: It may well be that intentional actions like typical turnings of doorknobs are not conjoined with any phenomenal experience of control. Yet, at least sometimes **attempts** at carrying out such actions are conjoined with a highly characteristic **phenomenology of frustration**: When unexpectedly the doorknob resists my effort at turning it (e.g. because the mechanism jams), arguably the way I feel as a result of this occurrence reveals my effort at turning the doorknob as an intentional effort. If, now, I judge that up until the frustration occurred, nothing psychologically distinguished the situation from a typical successful doorknob turning, I may inductively infer that typical successful doorknob turnings are also (unconsciously) conjoined with the kind of intention, of which my conscious feeling of frustration made me aware in the frustrated attempt. But, the involuntarist may now argue, concerning belief-formation we even lack such indirect evidence of intentionality: It is never the case that we feel ourselves frustrated in an effort to form or abandon some belief. Thus, despite the possibility of intentional action without any “experience of control”, doxastic events still lack the link to phenomenology characteristic of intentional action.

²⁴ Steup(2012, 154-155). Steup calls such actions “automatic”. This, however, seems unfortunate. Unconscious gear-changes and the like are still part of larger plans, e.g. driving to work, whether or not those plans are entirely conscious. Not so for the mindless movements of an automaton.

²⁵ See Steup(2012, 156). One may also talk of an “experience of acting”, following the preferred terminology of Searle(1983, 83).

²⁶ Steup(2012, 156).

This involuntarist rejoinder, however, has less force than might initially seem: First, the lack of past experiences of frustration is no decisive objection. Perhaps, once a doxastic intention is formed, it is very rarely, if ever, frustrated. Here belief-formation may resemble mental actions like calling to mind very simple things like the image of a circle. Second, it is not entirely obvious that a relevant kind of frustration is never felt in doxastic cases. A juror may well feel frustrated in her efforts to stop believing that the defendant is guilty after she has duly acknowledged that the evidence presented in court justifies no such conclusion. Simply to rule that this juror's felt frustrations are not linked to intentions in the relevant way, would seem to beg the question against DV.²⁷

Obviously, the DV rejoinders against involuntarist arguments discussed above are complex and worthy of much further debate. In the present context, however, the crucial observation is this: No matter how well those arguments succeed in **keeping open** the question whether some doxastic events qualify as intentional, they have not added the slightest **positive** support to DV. They have only managed to dispel involuntarist pretensions to a quick and easy victory over DV. Still we lack any positive reason to think, regarding any actual doxastic event, that it was in fact intentional. Steup, however, aims radically to change that situation with a final ambitious argument: This time we are presented with a plausible account of a mundane course of events and asked to concede that this story does in fact involve intentional belief-formation:

Car Theft: Suppose that, having returned from a trip and taken a shuttle to the airport parking garage, I am now where I thought I left my car. To my surprise, it is no longer there. I wonder whether it has been stolen. There is of course the possibility that I don't accurately remember where I parked it. So I retrieve the paper slip which states the exact location of my parking spot. According to the slip, I am at the right spot. Considering my evidence – the parking slip and the absence of my car – I conclude that it was stolen.²⁸

According to Steup (Car Theft) may naturally be said to involve the following events:

- (i) Wondering whether Theft [i.e. the proposition that my car was stolen] is true, I suspend judgment about Theft.
- (ii) I consider my reasons for and against Theft.
- (iii) Concluding that I have good reasons for taking Theft to be true, I decide to believe Theft

²⁷ Here, I owe much to private correspondence and conversation with Steup on the relevant matters. See also McCormick(2005) on the phenomenon of "compelled belief".

²⁸ Steup(2012, 157).

- (iv) My attitude of suspending judgment about Theft is replaced by that of *believing* Theft.
- (v) I believe Theft *because* I decided to believe Theft, and the causal relation between my decision and my belief is non-deviant.²⁹

Clearly the crux of this analysis is (iv)-(v), which perhaps are better conjoined and expressed thus: My attitude of suspending judgment about Theft was replaced by that of *believing* Theft, because I decided to believe Theft.³⁰ On this basis Steup thinks that “...we should conclude that beliefs can be formed as a result of doxastic decision making, and thus can be intentionally acquired”³¹.

At last, an ambitious positive argument for DV has been presented. Obviously, (Car Theft) describes a course of events so mundane that a concession of intentional belief-formation here naturally leads us to conclude that intentional belief-formations are quite common in our lives, thus robustly vindicating DV as a psychological thesis (with great prospects for underwriting common ascriptions of doxastic blame and praise, even if this project does not explicitly concern Steup here).

However, I shall proceed to argue, cases like (Car Theft) do not convincingly establish what DV needs. The first basic problem is this: We may concede that there is a clear sense in which Steup’s protagonist in (Car Theft) *decides* to believe that his car been stolen. But it is very unclear that this “decision” really amounts to anything different from the event of his doxastic attitude changing from suspension of judgment into belief w.r.t. Theft. Simply describing this event as a “decision” does not sufficiently establish its intentionality.³² Second, the involuntarist may safely concede that this doxastic event may naturally be seen as the end result of the protagonist’s intentionally considering Theft (even if it not entirely clear how psychologically plausible it is under the circumstances that the protagonists’ wonder was up to him): That some event comes about as the termination of an intentional process does not suffice to make that event intentional: Compare this with (unintentionally) hitting a wall, thus terminating an intentional process of running down a dark corridor. Third, the involuntarist may safely concede the naturalness of Steup’s description of the doxastic change as coming about “because” the protagonist decided to believe Theft. Only this “because” does not obviously denote a causal relation. In fact, Steup presents no evidence that this “because” does not denote a non-causal explicatory relation (rhetorically, Steup’s talk of “non-deviant

²⁹ Steup(2012, 157)

³⁰ Steup(2012, 157). I find my wording superior here, since it clearly brings out that it is the doxastic event of *changing* from suspension of judgment to belief w.r.t. Theft, which is thought to be the object of my decision, not the belief-state itself. Steup’s worries about “deviant causation” arise from concerns that arguably some relations between intentions and events are too deviant to establish the event’s intentionality (see. e.g. Chisholm(1966, 37). Those complications need not concern us here, since they are not relevant to the evaluation of Steup’s argument. Also Steup makes no systematic effort toward accounting for the difference between deviant and non-deviant causation.

³¹ Steup(2012, 158).

³² See also Nottelmann(2006), not least Section 3.

causation” in the context helps mask this fact): It is not wrong to say that bachelors are unmarried, because a bachelor is simply an unmarried man. Similarly “..because I decided to believe Theft” may be taken as an explication and precisification of what was asserted just before; the occurrence of the event of the protagonist **shifting into belief in Theft** after his having considered Theft for a while. Here I shall not deny that a causal reading of the relevant “because” is the more natural interpretation in the context³³. Yet there is some way from establishing the naturalness of a description of a course of events in terms of expressions like “A, because B” to establishing any causal relation between A and B, let alone the kind of causal connection characteristic of intentional action.

Steup proceeds to challenge any unmoved involuntarist to point out how the “decision” involved in (Car Theft) is really different from the clearly intentional kind of “decision” involved when I decide to take a walk after having thought about whether I should take a walk:

By taking a walk, I carry out my intention to take a walk, and by believing [coming to believe?] Theft, I carry out my intention to believe that my car was stolen. So unless involuntarism can point to a relevant difference, we should conclude that beliefs can be formed as a result of doxastic decision making, and thus can be intentionally acquired.³⁴

But Steup has hardly gained the dialectical high ground at this stage that would entitle him to challenge any denier of DV so brashly: As I have brought out above, cases like (Car Theft) are in fact the only positive evidence for DV brought forth by Steup. The rest of his arguments, however convincing they may be, at best neutralize involuntarist objections. They may succeed in keeping open the key question, whether intentional doxastic events do in fact occur, but they do not bring forth plausible candidates for such events. (Car Theft) constitutes a serious effort toward making a positive case for DV. However, even if (Car Theft) may naturally be described in a way that offers DV some hope (using terms like “decision”, “because” etc.), in the relevant context those same expressions are easily interpreted in a way fully compatible with involuntarism. Thus, Steup has not gained a position from which legitimately he may force an involuntarist to make precise the difference between deciding to take a walk and deciding to believe Theft, or else acknowledge the truth of DV.

³³ I thank an anonymous reviewer for this journal for urging me to make this clear. Another strategy would be to deny the truth of **any** expression of the form “he decided to believe that his car was stolen” as applying to Steup’s example. However, I do not think this price is worth paying: Such expressions quite naturally apply to (Car Theft) and similar cases, and there seems to be no easy way of pragmatically explaining away their assertability. Arguably, here we typically mean either something like “his deliberations about whether his car was stolen terminated in his forming a belief that his car was stolen” or “he chose to adopt the assumption that his car was stolen as a premise for his further conscious reasoning”. In any case the burden is on the voluntarist to show that accepting as true “he decided to believe that his car was stolen” brings with it any degree of commitment to DV.

³⁴ Steup(2012, 158).

Rather, an involuntarist may simply observe that (Car Theft) does not obviously suggest a voluntarist reading, and remain unconvinced of DV, even if she cannot make precise how and why taking a walk is normally an intentional activity. Really, it would have been very surprising, had Steup managed to establish a superior dialectical position: As Elizabeth Anscombe famously made us aware, in a sense the deep question concerning the nature of intentional action comes to explaining what is the difference between moving one's body and mere bodily movement (e.g. between my arm dropping and my lowering my arm at the pace of gravity³⁵). Answering Steup's challenge of pointing out exactly the relevant difference between doxastic and practical "decision" presumably would involve the highly difficult task of explaining exactly how my decision to take a walk in a park relates to my intentionally walking in the park. It would have been incredible if, by way of one simple example, Steup had forced his involuntarist opponent either to present a convincing solution to one of the deepest problems in all of philosophy, or else to accept DV.

In conclusion, the outcome of Steup's battle with involuntarism is a stalemate: Steup deserves great credit for showing that involuntarism may not claim any fast and easy victory. However, Steup does not offer a convincing positive case for DV. Crucially, he is unable to present reasons why we should regard "doxastic decisions" as distinct from mere doxastic events, or why we should ever regard such events as intentional, be they characterizable as "decisions" or not.

Since Alston's challenge to DV has occupied so much of the literature, perhaps it also worth noticing at this stage of my argument, that some nuances in Alston's position have gone largely unappreciated by voluntarists. Actually, Alston is not quite the stalwart flat-out denier of DV portrayed by Steup, as the following passage should reveal:

Partisans of a voluntary control thesis will counter by calling attention to cases in which things don't appear to be so cut and dried: cases of radical underdetermination by evidence...(...); or cases of the acceptance of a religious or philosophical position, where there seems to be a number of equally viable alternatives. In such cases it can appear that one makes a decision as to what to believe and not to believe. My view on those matters is that insofar as something is chosen voluntarily, it is something other than a belief or abstension from belief....(...).But even if I am mistaken about these kinds of cases, it is clear that for the vast majority of beliefs nothing like direct voluntary control is involved. And so J_{dv} [i.e. a conception of epistemic justification based on DV] could not possibly be a generally applicable concept of epistemic justification.³⁶

³⁵ Anscombe(1957, 54)

³⁶ Alston(1989, 92)

It would seem that even if Alston takes a firm involuntarist stand, he does grant his opponents some outstanding doubts concerning specific cases of belief-formation (the ones that are not “cut and dried”). Yet, this does not lead Alston any closer to taking seriously a normative doxastic ethics (specifically an account of epistemic blameworthiness and blamelessness) based on DV assumptions. A fair guess as to Alston’s motivations here seems to be this: Even if sometimes “it appear that one makes a decision as to what to believe and what not to believe” (perhaps in cases like Steup’s Car Theft), voluntarists have not presented serious positive evidence that beliefs are chosen voluntarily here. In lack of such positive evidence, it would seem ill-advised to base a substantial doxastic ethics upon DV assumptions. Thus, rather than a decisive death-blow to DV, Alston’s original challenge perhaps is best read as a tantalizing lure provoking DV to come up with the kind of positive evidence so readily available in the cases of basic physical and mental action. In Alston’s eyes, the failure of DV to present this evidence then does not mean that DV is decisively refuted (or at least Alston does not regard decisive refutation as essential to his argument). Rather it means that DV has not met the evidential standards for being taken seriously as an empirical thesis with a legitimate claim to informing normative doxastic ethics on a fundamental level.

4. Doxastic voluntarism poised for a descriptivist comeback?

It would appear then that DV is a questionable psychological thesis, even if we grant that it has not been decisively refuted either. As pointed out in the introduction to this paper, this dubious status rubs off to any attempt toward normatively grounding ascriptions of doxastic blame- and praiseworthiness in DV, e.g. to say that some agent is to blame for believing that the Holocaust never occurred partly because she voluntarily formed that belief. However naturally such expressions may come to some of us, they fail justifiably to establish any normative grounds for the relevant deontic appraisals.

In contrast to the justificatory precariousness of DV, it would seem entirely uncontroversial that under many circumstances we may easily influence which propositions we believe - as well as the epistemic quality of those beliefs – **indirectly** through intentional actions relating to education, evidence-gathering etc.³⁷ An account of the normative grounds of doxastic blame and praise rooted in **indirect**, rather than direct, voluntary influence over the relevant doxastic states, thus would seem to rest on much firmer empirical ground. From the perspective of **normative** doxastic ethics, then, it is hard to see why at present we should take DV seriously as a contender to IC.

³⁷ See Nottelmann(2007, Chapters 10-11).

Suppose, however, that champions of DV could convincingly argue that our present practices of deontologically evaluating doxastic states (i.e. dishing out blame and praise to agents on account of their being in certain doxastic states) do in fact rely on DV background assumptions. If this were the case, any theoretical account within normative doxastic ethics inconsistent with DV would be strongly revisionistic in character; e.g. it could not easily sanction typical ascriptions of doxastic blame insofar as those would be seen as informed by dubious DV assumptions. As a result theorizing within normative doxastic ethics would become very difficult. Standard accounts of the subject, which typically begin by sanctioning widely shared normative reactions to certain cases, would stand in need of serious reconsideration. E.g. this problem would affect the methodology of that famous grounding work in the modern tradition, Clifford's celebrated "Ethics of Belief" essay with its opening appeal to the obvious doxastic blameworthiness of the unscrupulous shipowner³⁸. Thus, even if DV has not established a direct case for its relevance to doxastic ethics by virtue of positively establishing its status as an empirical psychological thesis, it may still pose a serious indirect threat to theories within normative doxastic ethics committed to rejecting DV, by bereaving those theories of standard appeals to actual ascription practices.

Ultimately, I shall deny that DV offers a better account of the psychological assumptions underlying typical ascription practices as compared to rival psychological accounts of doxastic control. However, I believe that the question whether DV does in fact offer the superior account is worthy of serious attention. At the very least, I suspect that adherents of DV would very much like that it did, and that opponents of DV will take some interest in seeing such hopes effectively frustrated.

5. The case for a descriptive vindication of doxastic voluntarism.

5.1. The notion of descriptive vindication.

I shall begin by introducing the concept of descriptive vindication (the status DV may hope for): Let *BP* be the conjunction of ascriptions of doxastic blame and praise "uncontroversial" in the sense that we deem them highly intuitive and very widely accepted. *BP* is taken to include measures of the blame or praise attributed. For illustration: If, in a certain case it is deemed uncontroversial that an agent is **severely** blameworthy for holding a certain belief, that judgment of severity is part of *BP*. If, in another case uncontroversially an agent is only **mildly** to blame for a certain belief, that judgment of mildness is also part

³⁸ Thus Clifford(1999, 70): "What shall we say of him? Surely this, that he was verily guilty of the death of those men. It is admitted that he did sincerely believe in the soundness of his ship; but the sincerity of his conviction can in no wise help him, because he had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him. He had acquired his belief not by honestly earning it in patient investigation, but by stifling his doubts."

of BP. Now, let G denote those background conditions assumed to hold in the cases eliciting the ascriptions constituting BP, which do not relate to doxastic control, but uncontroversially still bear on the relevant agents' doxastic blame or praise. I now propose to call a psychological account of doxastic control *DC* "descriptively vindicated" if the following condition holds: The conjunction BP & G & not-DC, once explicated, is untenable in some philosophically relevant sense; e.g. it is inconsistent, incomprehensible, or without adequate justification.

I have left the concept of descriptive vindication somewhat vague here in order to allow the voluntarist maximal elbow room to defend DV on descriptivist terms. In order to get into a clearer focus which kind of defensive strategy I have in mind here, notice that it resembles the case Peter Strawson aimed to establish for what he called "human freedom" in his seminal 1962 essay "Freedom and Resentment", at least in Galen Strawson's influential interpretation (or extrapolation³⁹) of that essay's central argument:

Indeed one can argue *from* the fact of our practically speaking unrenouncable commitments to these (at least partly) non-epistemic things, these feelings, attitudes and practices [of resentment], *to* the conclusion that no claim that the belief in true responsibility [i.e. human freedom] is false needs to be taken seriously. For if the truth of the belief in true responsibility is indeed *in some sense* a necessary condition of the justifiability of these attitudes and practices, the justifiability of these attitudes and practices is by the same token a sufficient condition of the truth of the belief. So if these attitudes and practices are independently justifiable, in some sense of 'justifiable' – if they are justifiable without appeal to the belief in responsibility (perhaps just by appeal to the fact it is an absolutely fundamental fact about us that we are deeply and perhaps unrenouncably committed to them) – then they can plausibly be taken to uphold the belief in responsibility, when pressure is put upon it. Instead of being supported by it, they can support it, being supported in turn by our unrenounceable commitment. Strawson does not offer precisely this

³⁹ Galen Strawson stresses that he does not claim to have precisely identified the argument offered by Strawson(1962). Arguably this is wise, since in Strawson's original text the argument is not altogether easy to follow in detail. Notice that this reading of Strawson differs from a reading, which was at least at some time explicitly endorsed by Steup. Here Steup construes Strawson as a so-called "reactive attitude compatibilist" along the following lines: "P.F. Strawson suggested that what's constitutive of an action's being free is its being a fit object for reactive attitudes such as blame, resentment, indignation, approval, admiration, forgiveness and the like". Steup(2008, 376). This interpretation is too strong, if we follow Galen Strawson's reading: Here, freedom is not (at least in any metaphysical sense) **constituted** by our attitudes and practices, only those practices non-rationally commit us to the affirmation of freedom. In the present context, however, it is more important to notice that in Steup's preferred interpretation, Strawson offers no assistance to DV, whereas in Galen Strawson's reading at least Strawson's general strategy offers DV the hope of descriptive vindication. Steup is right to insist that "while reactive attitude compatibilism lends itself nicely to supporting the thesis of doxastic freedom, it does not explain a lot" (2008, 378). Not least this type of compatibilism lends no obvious support to the view that "doxastic freedom" should be construed in a DV manner.

argument. But he does claim, in a comparable way, that we are *non-rationally* committed to the personal-reactive attitudes and practices [e.g. of resentment] – and hence, presumably, to belief in the applicability of the concepts of responsibility and freedom – in such a way that it cannot be right to suppose to give them up would be the correct and rational thing to do if determinism were shown to be true.⁴⁰

I think there are fundamental obstacles to the claim that by appeal to descriptive vindication DV may hope to establish as strong a case as Galen Strawson believes to be the ambition of the above argument in favor of human freedom and responsibility: It is at least unclear whether even the most uncontroversial ascriptions of doxastic blame and praise may aspire to absolute “fundamentality” and/or “unrenouncability” in a sense relevant to Galen Strawson’s analysis. Thus, perhaps it would be unwise for DV to aim for the brash conclusion that, given our ascription practices, involuntarism “need not be taken seriously”. Still, DV may perhaps hope to establish the slightly less ambitious conclusion that, given those practices, voluntarism should be taken very seriously, since the structure of the reconstructed Strawsonian argument remains highly useful to DV: Even if we have no positive psychological evidence in favor of DV (and above I have suggested that this is currently the case), it may still be – in Galen Strawson’s preferred phrasing - that the truth of the belief in DV is indeed *in some sense* a necessary condition of the justifiability of even our most uncontroversial attitudes and practices with regard to doxastic blame and praise. If this be the case, we are in a certain sense committed to DV, even in the absence of independent positive evidence in its favor. Here we may even bracket the issue whether our attitudes and practices are ultimately fair and just. It is enough that we are in a relevant sense deeply committed to them.

For illustration, suppose e.g. that we see Clifford’s famous shipowner example as involving an ascription of doxastic blame to which we find ourselves deeply committed. Surely, this seems to have been Clifford’s intention. Our verdict that the shipowner is severely blameworthy for believing the ship is seaworthy under the wider circumstances described by Clifford (the ship was old and not too well built, the shipowner had had previous doubts whether the ship was seaworthy etc.⁴¹) then would belong to the set of propositions constituting BP & G. Suppose now we are told that for the shipowner intentionally forming or abandoning a belief that the ship was seaworthy was psychologically impossible (not-DV). Suppose also, that once the implications of this further information is worked out it is impossible to see how we may establish the shipowner’s doxastic guilt under the further empirical circumstances obviously bearing on the matter. In that case, DV would be descriptively vindicated.

⁴⁰ Strawson(1993, 69).

⁴¹ See Clifford(1999, 70).

Which indications do we have that DV might in fact be descriptively vindicated? I shall consider two arguments below. The first one re-iterates Steup's observations concerning the naturalness of describing cases like (Car Theft) as involving decisions to believe. The second argument insists that uncontroversial judgments concerning the **severity** (i.e. high degree) of doxastic blame in certain cases cannot be justified except by an appeal to DV. Ultimately I shall claim that neither argument establishes a decisive descriptive vindication of DV.

5.2. The appeal to doxastic decision-making.

Proponents of this argument may begin by noticing that talk of doxastic decision-making is in fact widespread and may easily be seen as closely associated with uncontroversial ascriptions of doxastic blame. E.g. Clifford's shipowner case may easily be given a gloss very comparable to Steup's (Car Theft) example. Here, according to Steup, a first important feature is this: "Wondering whether Theft is true, I suspend judgment about Theft."⁴² With Clifford, the story also begins with the shipowner wondering whether his ship is seaworthy: "Doubts had been suggested to him that possibly she [i.e. the ship] was not seaworthy. These doubts preyed upon his mind and made him unhappy; he thought that perhaps he ought to have her thoroughly overhauled and refitted, even though this should put him to great expense."⁴³ In Car Theft, the protagonist now moves on to "consider [his] reasons for and against Theft". The shipowner also runs over his evidence, e.g. "[h]e said to himself that she [i.e. the ship] had gone safely through so many voyages and weathered so many storms that it was idle to suppose she would not come safely home from this voyage also". Then, the protagonist in Car Theft makes up his mind on the basis of his considerations of the evidence: "Concluding that I have good reason for taking Theft to be true, I decide to believe Theft". In Clifford's case, the shipowner also makes up his mind and "put his trust in Providence, which could hardly fail to protect all these unhappy families [i.e. the ship's passengers]". In Car Theft, finally, suspension of judgment gives way to belief in Theft, "because I decided to believe Theft". In Clifford's case, "In such ways he [the shipowner] acquired a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy".

Suppose we are told now to accept that whether or not the shipowner formed his belief that the ship was seaworthy, or whether or not he abandoned that belief once formed, simply **was not up to him**; it simply

⁴² Steup(2012, 157). Similarly for the rest of this passage.

⁴³ Clifford(1999, 70). Similarly for the rest of this passage.

wasn't his decision in any real sense. Rather, he was merely a **passive victim** of the evidence that happened to come before his mind. May we comfortably uphold our verdict that the shipowner was blameworthy for believing the ship to be seaworthy. Or should we concede that this verdict jars against an explicit rejection of DV? Here, a proponent of DV might offer the following line of reasoning: As the story of the shipowner was told above, clearly it involved doxastic decision-making: Under the circumstances and after having thought about the matter, the shipowner **decided** to believe that the ship was seaworthy. Now we cannot judge the shipowner blameworthy for holding his belief that the ship was blameworthy, unless we may hold him blameworthy for **deciding** to believe that the ship was seaworthy. And how may we justify holding him blameworthy for this decision, unless he decided to believe this proposition in a full sense of "decision"; the sense of "decision" relevant when we blame people for the harmful consequences of the decisions they take in their practical life? For comparisons, consider a case where we blame someone for detonating a bomb, thus killing several innocent people. As it happened, the detonation of this bomb necessarily involved pulling a certain handle. The bomber decided to pull that handle and we blame him for that decision. If we could not blame him for that decision, we could hardly justify blaming him for detonating the bomb. But what if we are told now that his decision to pull the handle was no "real decision" after all: In a fundamental sense, whether he pulled the handle at that occasion was not up to him. In that case, when we say that he "decided" to pull the handle, we are only re-describing the event of the handle moving with the agent's hand on it; we are not implying or even suggesting that his intentions were at work in moving the handle. Could we still blame him for deciding to pull the handle? It is hard to see that we could. But seemingly we **must** blame him for pulling the handle, if we are to uphold our verdict that he was to blame for the bombing. Similarly, the voluntarist could argue, the shipowner's decision to believe that his ship was sea-worthy must be construed as a "real" full-blooded decision, involving the shipowner's intentions. Else we cannot regard the ensuing belief as blameworthy in any substantial sense. In that case we cannot justify, what arguably our practices commit us to regard as obviously justifiable, namely the verdict that the shipowner was blameworthy for believing that his ship was seaworthy.

As I argued above, comparisons between standard cases of doxastic and practical decision-making made little obvious progress with regard to justifying DV as a psychological thesis. But, in the context of a descriptive vindication of DV along the lines indicated above, finally they seem to be in their right waters. Below I shall hope to disarm the claim that arguments of this type offer DV decisive descriptive vindication. But I shall not deny that they carry at least some intuitive force.

5.3. The appeal to the severity of blame in doxastic cases.

Another route toward descriptive vindication of DV also takes its cue from allegedly uncontroversial cases of doxastic blame like Clifford's shipowner example, but places its accents differently. Here it is not the commitment to justify an ascription of doxastic blame that takes center stage, but rather the commitment to justifying an ascription of **severe** (doxastic) blame. Thus, a proponent of DV may insist that denying DV would leave us in the dark how ascriptions of **severe** blame may in fact be underwritten in doxastic cases.

This argument, like the previous, may profit from comparisons with practical cases: Generally, we consider harm resulting from negligence much less blameworthy than intentional action. Consider e.g. the severity of reproach and disgust we would characteristically direct towards someone, who intentionally pushes an innocent by-stander into a deep pit, and compare those reactive attitudes with the milder ones we would characteristically direct towards a worker who negligently failed to cover up that pit, thus being partially responsible for someone's falling into the pit on a dark evening. Further, consider that if we reject DV, the relationship between our intentions and our doxastic lives is at best indirect and characterized by a great deal of indeterminacy: Sure enough we may do our best to stay alert and be on the lookout for evidence likely to bear on our future doxastic states, but it is hard to say exactly which beliefs will result from those intentional doings. Should some harmful doxastic event occur, it is hard to see how we may justify ascribing to the believer a blame more severe, than we would ascribe for her original negligence with regard to alertness and evidence-gathering, if those were her failures directly bearing on the culpable belief-state. But in themselves such instances of negligence rarely offend us deeply or elicit very strong reactive attitudes. How then, may we ever hope to justify ascriptions of **severe** doxastic blame, while rejecting DV?

To further unfurl this argument, I shall once again recur to Clifford's shipowner case. Suppose we grant Clifford that uncontroversially the blame we ascribe to the shipowner is quite severe⁴⁴. But suppose we reject DV. Hence we cannot easily blame him for his "decision" to believe that the ship is seaworthy, and leave it at that. That "decision", now, is merely his belief-formation by another name. Rather we must blame him on account of the intentional activities that led to this doxastic event. Clifford tells us little about those activities directly, even if does offer some suggestive phrases: "He [the shipowner] said to himself that she [the ship] had gone safely through so many voyages and weathered so many storms that it was idle to suppose she would not come safely home from this trip also. He would put his trust in Providence, which could hardly fail to protect all these unhappy families that were leaving their fatherland to seek for better times elsewhere. He would dismiss from his mind all ungenerous suspicions about the

⁴⁴ Clifford vehemently stresses the severity of doxastic blame in such cases. E.g. he talks of a doxastic transgression "leaving its stamp upon our character for ever" (1999, 73), or as involving "a defiance of our duty to mankind" (1999, 75).

honesty of builders and contractors.”⁴⁵ In short, then, at least in the final stages of his deliberation the shipowner seemed to engage in some kind of willful self-suggestion, intentionally rehearsing that part of his accessible evidence, which supported belief in the ship’s seaworthiness. By implication, at least at that stage he also intentionally did his best to ignore whatever evidence suggested the contrary conclusion. In short, the shipowner actively “stifled his doubts”⁴⁶. This mental behavior may seem reproachable in hindsight when knowing the disaster resulting from it. But consider that it is not at all atypical: Very often we must reach a decision on some important matter. Psychologically that process must involve giving evidence on one side of the relevant question more attention than contrary evidence, at least in the final stages of our deliberation. If neurotically we kept on shifting our focus from affirmatory to contrary evidence and back again when we must make up our minds, arguably we would never manage to lead a practical life in a confusing world filled with uncertainties.

Now, if we reject DV, we should remember that the shipowner’s situation is very different from that of an agent deliberating over a practical decision, such as whether or not to take a walk in a park. In a fundamental sense it is not up to the shipowner, when and how his thinking lead to a settled belief on the matter of the ship’s seaworthiness. All he can intentionally do is keep the process going until some belief materializes. Sure enough he could aim consciously to focus on evidence suggesting that the ship is seaworthy. But under the circumstances it was not really up to him whether that strategy would succeed in leading to a belief in the ship’s seaworthiness. In general it is rarely up to us which types of evidence most appeal to us, or which evidence comes to our minds during deliberation. In conclusion, then, the following may be said: If we deny DV, we no longer have the opportunity of anchoring our ascription of severe doxastic blame in the severe blameworthiness of the shipowner’s **intentionally** forming a belief in the ship’s seaworthiness. Clifford’s contention that, when a blameworthy believer like the shipowner “acquired and nourished a belief, which he had no right to believe”, he “had done a wrong thing”⁴⁷, can no longer be given a straightforward intentional reading. Rather, in looking for relevant wrong-doing, we must look past the doxastic decision to the intentional activities preceding it. But on closer inspection, seemingly we found very little severely to blame here. Sure enough, the shipowner focused mostly on one side of the relevant question, but that mental behavior in itself was neither atypical nor unexpected. And whether that strategy was manageable or resulted in the relevant belief was not up to him in any substantial sense: We might say that the shipowner was simply the victim of his general cognitive dispositions here. Only because of those, did his run-of-the-mill cognitive strategy elicit such disastrous results at the relevant occasion. In conclusion

⁴⁵ Clifford(1999, 70).

⁴⁶ Clifford(1999, 70).

⁴⁷ Clifford(1999, 72).

then, it would seem that we cannot deny DV without losing any hope of justifying an ascription of severe blame to the shipowner for his belief that the ship was seaworthy. But in some sense, our practices of ascribing severe doxastic blame in cases like this do seem to commit us to regarding such ascriptions as justifiable. Else there would be little point in presenting them in the course of developing justificatory principles, as did e.g. Clifford.

6. Against a descriptive vindication of doxastic voluntarism.

6.1. The general challenge.

Above I hope to have made plausible the claim that even if the kind of comparisons between practical and doxastic decision-making typical in the DV literature⁴⁸ do little to establish DV as a psychological thesis, they do in fact offer some hope for a descriptive vindication of DV. As such, they pose a strong challenge to rival views concerning the justificatory relation between psychological doxastic control theses and ascriptions of doxastic blame and praise. Thus, I have hardly set up a harmless strawman here: No matter if any actual proponent of DV endorses the arguments in favor of descriptive vindication set up above, still those arguments seem worthy of explication and serious consideration. Also surely such arguments are central to the case for taking DV seriously within normative doxastic ethics, given that the psychological evidence in its favor is currently inconclusive at best. Thus, debunking the two suggested arguments in favor of DV's descriptive vindication is no trivial task. Below I shall consider them in turn.

6.2. Against the appeal to doxastic decision-making.

The appeal to doxastic decision-making centered on the claim that in Clifford's shipowner example (and similar cases) we would need to justify our ascriptions of doxastic blame through also blaming the shipowner for his doxastic decision-making under the circumstances. Obviously, blaming this decision-making would be rather straightforward, if it be construed as an intentional occurrence, whereas it would seem at least somewhat mysterious given we construe the relevant "decision" as a mere automatic response to the available evidence. Appearances, however, are deceptive. The air of mystery dissolves, once we keep in mind that very often we blame people for mere **consequences** of their intentional actions;

⁴⁸ See also Nottelmann(2006).

consequences whose exact timing and development they had little power to influence. Suppose, e.g. that I intentionally dug a sizeable pit outside my friend's driveway and cleverly camouflaged it, perhaps as part of some elaborate prank. Later, an unsuspecting mailman arrives in my friend's driveway. He falls into the newly dug pit, badly hurting his ankle. Surely I can be blamed for this, given that arguably I could – and should – have taken into account the risk of this type of accident⁴⁹. If anybody is rightfully to blame for the postman's hurt ankle, I am. But the postman's injury was not something I intentionally brought about. It was merely a consequence of other events, including my foolish actions of digging and disguising the pit. Also the timing of that event was outside my control. E.g. it was not up to me in any serious sense whether the postman even worked that day or stayed home sick.

Similarly, an adherent of IC may safely concede to DC the plausible claim that unless the shipowner is to blame for his fatal doxastic decision to believe that the ship was seaworthy, he may not be blamed for his ensuing belief. Only according to IC, we need not assume that the relevant "decision" amounted to more than a mere shift in doxastic attitude. Rather the important matter is whether that shift may be seen, in relevant part, as a blameworthy consequence of the shipowner's prior blameworthy action; a consequence for which he may legitimately be blamed, even if many aspects surrounding it (e.g. its timing) were not up to him. E.g. IC may suggest that a consideration of the shipowner's strategy of intentionally diverting his attention from contrary evidence suffices to render blameworthy the resulting doxastic state shift, in so far as the shipowner had no right to ignore the contrary evidence under the circumstances.

Overall then, arguably countering DV's appeal to doxastic decision-making on behalf of IC poses no great theoretical challenge. DV may protest that it sounds rather paradoxical to argue that some "decisions" (the doxastic ones) are merely relevant to deontic evaluations of the "decider" in virtue of being mere consequences of intentional action. But this paradoxality resides in DV's preferred wording only. Once the "decision" is re-described as a mere shift in doxastic states, no outstanding problems remain.

6.3. Against the appeal to the severity of blame in doxastic cases.

DV's appeal to the severity of blame ascribed in doxastic cases poses a challenge far more complex and demanding in the context of descriptive vindication. An adherent of IC could pursue several strategies here: First, she could argue that no uncontroversial ascription of doxastic blame is in fact an ascription of blame so severe that it renders problematic a justification along IC lines: It is enough to observe that blame for doxastic decisions does never quite equal blame for practical decisions in severity. Second, she could argue

⁴⁹ The exact relation between foresight and responsibility for action consequences is a very complex issue. See e.g. Nottelmann(2007, Chapter 13). See also Nottelmann(2004).

that on closer inspection the seemingly rather innocent intentional doings, which, according to IC, give rise to uncontroversial counts of severely blameworthy belief, are in fact severely blameworthy in their own right. Hence IC has no problem explaining why some consequences of such severely blameworthy belief-influencing actions should also be considered severely blameworthy. Third, IC could challenge the principle implicitly appealed to on behalf of DV in section 5.3 above that action consequences never render an agent blameworthy to a significantly higher degree than did originally her actions causing them (even if of course the agents may become blameworthy to *some* degree for more and more separate events as the consequences of her actions materialize over time). I shall consider each of those strategies in turn, ultimately endorsing the third strategy.

With regard to the first strategy above, I believe DV has the upper hand. Indeed e.g. it is hard to see how, without begging the question against the descriptive vindication of DV, we could seriously argue that we should not really consider the shipowner's belief very blameworthy after all. In fact it does not seem hard to trigger ascriptions of rather severe doxastic blame without filling in very many details concerning the relevant agent's history of indirect doxastic influence. Voluntarists seem right here to insist on the centrality of verdicts that the relevant agent "made up her mind" or "decided" against the relevant evidence. In any case it would seem contentious to challenge DV on this particular issue.

The second defensive strategy is also problematic. Return again to the shipowner case and grant DV that the doxastic blame typically ascribed to the shipowner is a rather severe. Still, considered in isolation, the shipowner's actions indirectly influencing his later formation of the culpable belief do not seem very reproachable. Sure enough, he rehearsed to himself the evidence indicating the ship's seaworthiness, and perhaps paid too little attention to contrary evidence. But as already noticed above, primarily focusing on one side of the relevant question, at least in the later stages of deliberation, seems a very typical trait of reasoning processes concerning uncertain matters. Had the shipowner's deliberation been interrupted by his coming across very strong evidence **against** the ship's seaworthiness, e.g. if he had noticed a large gaping hole in the ship's hull, supposedly he would never have managed to form his firm conviction that the ship was seaworthy. In that case, also it seems unclear that we would ever have blamed him severely on behalf of his earlier reasoning processes alone. At least it seems unclear that we would have blamed him as severely as we are prone to blame him for his fatal belief, and the resulting deaths of the passengers entrusted to him. This observation undercuts the second IC strategy against DV's claim to descriptive vindication on account of the severity of doxastic blame typically ascribed in cases like the shipowner example.

This takes us to the third defense strategy on behalf of IC. Unlike the strategies considered above, I take this strategy to be successful, since here IC may turn the tables on DV by bringing to the foreground a rather common phenomenon regarding blame ascription for action consequences: Sometimes, even on reflection, we hold agents blameworthy for certain action consequences to a quite severe degree, even if typically we do not regard the actions causing those consequences as very blameworthy in themselves (i.e. when seen in isolation from particular harmful consequences). Suppose e.g. that city regulations require me to spread salt on my sidewalk before 7am each morning during winter. One day, having had a hard schedule on my demanding job the previous night, I fail to turn on my alarm clock and slightly oversleep. Thus, I do not spread the salt on the sidewalk before 7.15 that morning. Normally, we would consider such oversights very minor offences in themselves, especially when we know that nothing bad resulted from them on a particular instance. But potentially they may cause injury, or even death. An elderly citizen could have slipped on my icy sidewalk at 7.10am, sustaining a fatal injury. In that case, I could be held at least partially responsible for her death, and most likely many would then consider me severely blameworthy for my role in the accident. Since we are in a descriptive context, we need not be concerned with the question whether such disproportional severity in blame ascription is ultimately fair and just. IC need only observe that such disproportionality is rather common⁵⁰. Thus, it is no great objection toward IC justifications of doxastic blame ascriptions, that most likely many widely endorsed severe counts of doxastic blame are only justifiable by reference to belief-influencing actions, which typically we would not consider severely blameworthy in themselves (i.e. if bad doxastic consequences had somehow been blocked). This only reflects a general puzzling feature of our blame ascription practices.⁵¹

In conclusion, DV is not offered decisive descriptive vindication by appeal to the severity of typical ascriptions of doxastic blame. Given the common phenomenon of disproportional blame ascribed for harmful action consequences vs. originating actions in isolation, it is not at all unexpected, should the same phenomenon arise in the realm of doxastic blame ascription. Denying DV does not obviously make that aspect of our blame ascription practices more puzzling than it was before.

⁵⁰ As nicely pointed out by an anonymous reviewer for this journal, blame retractions are also part of our ascription practices. Hence, in order for the suggested strategy to be successful, it must be the case that the relevant disproportionality persists, even after “harsh blamers” have been given opportunity to revise and mollify their initial verdicts. I concede that often in cases of severe harm-doing cries for revenge and bitter resentment tends to recede as time passes and a more fair-minded perspective is gained. However, arguably a stark disproportionality persists. E.g. a truck driver’s killing of an innocent child may well cast a lasting shadow over her public image and self-esteem, even if she could just as well have hit only a trash can, in which case nobody would have devoted the accident any lasting attention.

⁵¹ For further reflection on this “blame lottery”, and its associated “punishment lottery”, see. e.g. Alexander(1990), and Nottelmann(2007, chapt. 13)

7. Conclusion

Above, I have argued that the psychological thesis of doxastic voluntarism (DV) still lacks positive evidence in its favor, even if key proponent like Matthias Steup have managed successfully to set aside several forceful involuntarist objections. In contrast, the indirect control view (IC) that we may **indirectly** influence our doxastic states through our intentional actions, is obviously well supported by the psychological evidence. In the realm of normative doxastic ethics then, insofar as we need to appeal to a psychological thesis regarding our psychological powers of doxastic control, IC would seem the more reasonable choice.⁵²

However, this still leaves open the important question whether DV assumptions help build a better **descriptive** account of our doxastic blame ascription practices than do rival psychological theses concerning doxastic control. Yet, the investigation undertaken above did not reveal any decisive advantage for DV in that regard. Rather, IC seemed to account at least equally well for central descriptive features of the relevant practices.

Thus, not only would it seem wrong-headed to base normative judgments within doxastic ethics on DV, since - at least presently - DV is not positively supported by our psychological evidence. It would also seem unjustified to assume that our common doxastic blame ascription practices operate on (tacit) DV background assumptions. At least, the investigation undertaken above unearthed no substantial support for that conclusion. It remains to be seen whether voluntarists may offer new evidence to suggest that DV should play a key role in our philosophical theorizing concerning doxastic blame and praise, either normatively or descriptively. After all, above I have hardly managed to consider and reject all the ways in which voluntarists may aim for empirical or descriptive vindication. At present, though, I remain somewhat pessimistic on their behalf.

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⁵² I phrase my conclusions conditionally here, since some have claimed that deontic evaluations of doxastic states are entirely unrelated to doxastic control suppositions. See. e.g. Owens(2000). I have no space to discuss such views here.

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