

Peels, Rik. *Responsible Belief: An Essay in Ethics and Epistemology*.

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We often attribute responsibility to others for their beliefs, and blame them for believing what they do. We say things like “you should not have been so easily taken in,” “the CEO should have known about the fraud,” or “the shipowner had no right to believe that the ship was seaworthy on the evidence before him.”

Rik Peels offers a novel and compelling account of responsible belief, and it is the first book-length account of the topic. He appears to interact with the entire literature on the ethics of belief as well as substantial portions of the literatures on obligation, control, ignorance, and luck. His arguments are lucid and charitable, and often very convincing. Anyone interested in the ethics of belief (or these other literatures) will not want to miss this book.

In Chapter 1, Peels defines responsible belief. Responsibility for an occurrent, dormant, or tacit belief amounts to deserving at least one normative attitude such as praise, blame, resentment, gratitude, indignation, remorse, or guilt. He convincingly argues that *responsible belief*—a kind of responsibility for belief—is most plausibly construed as *blameless* belief (properly subject to either neutral appraisal or praise) as opposed to praiseworthy belief.

In Chapter 2, Peels explicates the *argument from doxastic involuntarism*, which is the problem that drives the book:

- (1) *S* responsibly believes that *p* only if *S* has met her obligation to believe that *p* or has not violated an obligation *not* to believe that *p*.
- (2) *S* has an obligation (not) to believe that *p* only if *S* has sufficient voluntary control over whether *S* believes that *p*.
- (3) *S* has no voluntary control over whether *S* believes that *p*.
- (4) Thus, *S* has no obligation (not) to believe that *p* (from 2-3).

From (4), it follows that *S* always or never believes responsibly that *p* depending on how (1) is understood. If we construe (1) such that a person can believe responsibly only if there are doxastic obligations that she has met or not violated, then she *never* believes responsibly, because there are no such obligations. But if we construe (1) such that a person can believe responsibly even if there are no doxastic obligations, then she *always* believes responsibly, because she never violates a doxastic obligation. Both conclusions depart from the starting point of the book—namely, that we often blame a person for her beliefs, and are correct to do so. The remainder of the chapter is demolition work. Peels considers and argues against four ways to undermine the argument from doxastic involuntarism. The first three responses target (3), and so attempt to show that we have sufficient control over our beliefs to have obligations to believe a proposition. The fourth response targets (2), and so aims to demonstrate that having an obligation does not require control. Peels’ arguments against these four responses are very persuasive. At this point, it appears to be a live option that we always or never believe responsibly.

In Chapter 3, Peels rejects (1) by suggesting that we can get doxastic responsibility by focusing on obligations to act—and not by obligations to believe. That is, Peels agrees that we do not have obligations to acquire, maintain, or jettison our beliefs due to lack of control over them, but he proposes that there are certain kinds of actions that we have obligations to perform and that we can get derivative responsibility for beliefs from those actions. More specifically, we have

obligations to perform actions that *influence* what we believe, and we may be *derivatively* responsible for the beliefs that *result* from keeping or violating *those* obligations.

The central aim of this chapter is to offer accounts of influence, intellectual obligation, and derivative responsibility. First, we influence our beliefs by acquiring or sharpening doxastic mechanisms, changing our cognitive situatedness, and acquiring or sharpening intellectual virtues and vices. Although a person's exercising influence over her beliefs in these ways involves making a causal difference to what she believes, *influence* falls short of control, because it is not foreseeable what particular beliefs will result from, say, getting glasses, reading Eleonore Stump's new book, or becoming openminded. Second, for *S* to have an intellectual obligation to perform a belief-influencing action φ , *S* must have control over φ -ing, φ -ing must make a difference to *S*'s beliefs, and $\sim\varphi$ -ing must lead to or maintain beliefs in *S* that are objectively or subjectively bad. Third, we are originally responsible for our belief-influencing actions, and derivatively responsible for the resultant beliefs. So, the central problem with (1) is that it construes doxastic responsibility only as original responsibility.

So far, we may roughly put Peels' account of responsible belief this way: *S* derivatively responsibly believes that *p* if and only if (i) *S* believes that *p* and (ii) *S* has not violated an intellectual obligation to perform a belief-influencing action such that if *S* had met that obligation, various belief-influencing factors would have been different and *S* would not have believed that *p* or (iii) *S* violates such an intellectual obligation but has an excuse that renders her blameless. In the remaining chapters, Peels further develops in significant ways this account of responsible belief by canvassing the potential excuses of force, ignorance, and luck.

In Chapter 4, Peels argues that force is a doxastic excuse. *S* is *forced* to believe that *p* if and only if *S* believes that *p* and cannot avoid believing that *p*. To put the phrase 'cannot avoid believing that *p*' in other words, there is no belief-influencing action (or series of actions) that *S* could have performed such that if *S* had performed it, *S* would not have believed that *p*. Peels argues that being blamelessly and diachronically forced to believe that *p* is the kind of excuse that removes *all* responsibility. Thus, responsibly believing that *p* (that is, deserving either neutral or positive responsibility appraisal) is ruled out by being forced in that way to believe that *p*. It follows, then, that responsible belief requires the ability to believe otherwise—namely, there is some belief-influencing action that *S* could have performed such that if had *S* performed it, *S* would not have believed that *p*. Peels defends this thesis against objections that include doxastic analogues of Frankfurt counterexamples and an asymmetry view that only blameworthiness requires the ability to believe otherwise.

In Chapter 5, Peels argues that ignorance is a doxastic excuse. He defines ignorance as lacking true belief, and so an agent may be ignorant of a proposition *p* by holding a false belief that *p* or no belief about *p*. Being ignorant with respect to an intellectual obligation fully excuses an agent's violation of it if and only if she is *blamelessly* ignorant in some way about the obligation.

Subsequently, Peels considers a regress problem that is partially generated by the claim that only blameless ignorance fully excuses. Suppose that *S* unwittingly violates an intellectual obligation. Plausibly, *S* is blameworthy for the action only if *S* is blameworthy for being ignorant. But if *S* is blameworthy for being ignorant, then *S* must have performed a past blameworthy action that resulted in that ignorance. Most of our blameworthy actions involve ignorance (we only rarely act *akratically*—knowing full-well our action is wrong), and so *S*'s past blameworthy action is plausibly unwitting. Of course, *S* is blameworthy for that past unwitting blameworthy action only if *S* performed some other blameworthy action in the more remote past. Here a regress looms. Peels

offers three responses to this regress, and I explicate the one relevant to his evolving account of responsible belief. He rejects the premise (suppressed above) that S is blameworthy for an action only if S 's action is from clear-eyed akrasia or blameworthy ignorance, because a person might be blameworthy for an action that she merely dormantly or tacitly believes is wrong, which is an action that involves neither clear-eyed akrasia nor ignorance. The upshot is that responsible belief is subjective in the following way: Whether a person responsibly believes depends on how she acts *given* the occurrent, dormant, and tacit beliefs that she has.

In Chapter 6, Peels considers whether luck is also an excuse. An event e is lucky for an agent S if and only if (i) S lacks control over e , (ii) e is significant for S , and (iii) e could easily have failed to occur. Peels recognizes that all beliefs are subject to at least one of four kinds of luck. *Mechanism* doxastic luck concerns the scope and functioning of cognitive faculties that an agent is lucky to have; *evidential* doxastic luck concerns the evidence with which a person is lucky to be presented; *aretaic* doxastic luck is about the intellectual virtues and vices that a person is lucky to have; *consequential* doxastic luck is about what beliefs luckily result from an action. Peels plausibly argues that mechanism, evidential, and aretaic doxastic luck do not excuse *unless* they reduce to force or ignorance, and that consequential doxastic luck *never* excuses. To fix a problem that arises from consequential doxastic luck, Peels revises his account of responsible belief so that a person believes responsibly that p only if p is non-accidentally related to an intellectual obligation about the action that results in p . He ends the chapter by explicating the problem of doxastic luck, and by offering a solution to it. I will return to this.

In an Appendix, Peels differentiates responsible belief from the closely related concept of epistemic justification.

Peels' book is insightful and provocative, and it is by far the most comprehensive treatment of the ethics of belief. It is brimming with tightly constructed arguments, and will set the agenda on the ethics of belief for years to come.

Nevertheless, I want to raise some difficulties for his solution to the problem of doxastic luck *and* for his general account of responsible belief. Here is the problem of doxastic luck:

- (6) All beliefs are subject to doxastic luck.
- (7) We are blameworthy for at least some of our beliefs.
- (8) Doxastic luck is incompatible with blameworthiness.

The problem, of course, is that these propositions are *prima facie* plausible but jointly inconsistent.

One might, however, reasonably wonder why Peels even considers this to be a problem. After all, earlier in Chapter 6, he offered compelling arguments that doxastic luck does not itself excuse; doxastic luck excuses only when it is reducible to force or ignorance. So, because most instances of doxastic luck do not reduce to force or ignorance, most instances of doxastic luck are *compatible* with blameworthiness. Thus, Peels has already given us a very good reason to think that (8) is false, and so a good reason to think that there is no problem.

What Peels does instead is to offer a distinction that will purportedly help us see the trouble with (8); the distinction also functions to fill out Peels' account of derivative responsibility. Following Michael Zimmerman, Peels distinguishes between degree and scope of responsibility. *Scope* concerns the number of events for which one is blameworthy, and it can be subject to luck. *Degree* concerns how much blame you deserve, and it is luck-free. Basically, degree counts for

everything. To illustrate this distinction, consider one of Peels' examples. Julia and Melanie both have racist beliefs and have an intellectual obligation to attend a class on racism. Both violate this obligation due to laziness. Julia's class would have removed some of her racist beliefs due to a good teacher, but Melanie's class would not have done so due to a bad teacher. Peels' account of responsible belief implies that only Julia is blameworthy for holding racist beliefs, because only she could have influenced her beliefs. But once we apply Zimmerman's distinction, we can supposedly see why this result is not counterintuitive. The basic idea is that Julia is responsible for more things (her racist beliefs), but neither deserves more blame than the other. That is, the scope of Julia's responsibility is greater than Melanie's, but the degree of their blameworthiness is the same. After all, they violated the same intellectual obligation; it is a matter of luck whether keeping that obligation would have influenced their beliefs; and only scope responsibility is compatible with luck.

Peels suggests that this distinction clarifies why (8) is intuitive but false. If (8) is about the scope of blameworthiness, it is false, and, if (8) is about the degree of blameworthiness, it is true. Thus, responsible belief *is* in some sense compatible with doxastic luck.

Nevertheless, this distinction between degree and scope and Peels' account of derivative responsibility imply that doxastic responsibility is objectionably weak. Because all beliefs are subject to consequential doxastic luck and only scope responsibility is compatible with doxastic luck, an agent is responsible in scope *only* for her beliefs. That is, all the blameworthy beliefs in the world do not add an *iota* to how much blame is deserved overall in the world. Put another way, how much blame a person deserves is determined only by her belief-influencing actions—and not her beliefs—which makes doxastic responsibility anemic. One way to solve this problem would be for Peels to reject the distinction between degree and scope of responsibility, and allow for people to be additionally praiseworthy and blameworthy for certain consequences of their actions, which amounts to accepting the existence of a doxastic variety of resultant moral luck.

Furthermore, the distinction between degree and scope is itself problematic, because it has unpalatable consequences in cases of mechanistic, evidential, and aretaic doxastic luck. Consider Lazy and Conscientious, two persons who grew up with racist beliefs. Lazy violates an obligation to gather evidence due to her laziness, and, as a result, she retains her racist belief that she would have lost if she had met her obligation to gather evidence. Thus, Lazy is blameworthy for holding racist beliefs. But Conscientious had a better intellectual upbringing. Conscientious keeps her obligation to gather evidence, and, as a result, holds no racist beliefs. Even so, Conscientious would have violated her intellectual obligation just like Lazy does if Conscientious had Lazy's worse intellectual upbringing. Thus, the salient difference between Lazy and Conscientious appears to be a matter of aretaic doxastic luck. As such, they must be equally blameworthy in degree. Thus, Conscientious deserves as much blame as Lazy even though Conscientious *actually* keeps her obligation, which is an absurd result.

Peels agrees that it is absurd to think that Conscientious deserves as much blame as Lazy and that this implication follows *but* for his account of luck. Recall that for Peels a necessary condition of a lucky event is that the event could easily have failed to occur. Call this the *modal condition*. The modal condition implies that luck is about what happens only in the actual world and nearby possible worlds. But since the possible world in which Conscientious has different early aretaic luck is no longer a nearby possible world at the time at which Conscientious keeps her intellectual

obligation, the difference between Lazy and Conscientious is not a matter of luck. Thus, it does not follow that they are equally blameworthy.

Nevertheless, Peels' application of his account of luck is problematic, and, thus, his view yields the absurd conclusion that Conscientious deserves as much blame as Lazy. Why is his application problematic? I am not disputing Peels' account of luck. He may well have produced the correct account. What I am disputing is that the modal condition is morally significant in the way that he thinks it is. Recall Peels' plausible view that doxastic luck excuses *only* when it is reducible to force or ignorance. Force and ignorance, however, are ways to lack control. What this suggests is that lack of control is the *only* part of luck that is incompatible with blameworthiness in the degree sense (cf. Robert J. Hartman, *In Defense of Moral Luck* [New York: Routledge, 2017], 26-29). But then, appealing to the modal condition to restrict Conscientious' blameworthiness is a morally *irrelevant* and *arbitrary* restriction. Thus, Peels' endorsement of the scope and degree distinction plausibly implies the absurd claim that Conscientious *is* as blameworthy in degree as Lazy. For Peels to avoid this absurd conclusion, he must either show that the modal condition is morally relevant, or give up the distinction between degree and scope.

Even though I have offered a few objections to Peels' view, these arguments should not be thought to detract from what Peels has accomplished in *Responsible Belief*. It is an impressive book, and I recommend that it be read widely.

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