**Some Metaphysical Implications of a Credible Ethics of Belief**

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**1. Introduction**

The central purpose of this essay is to discuss some important implications of any credible ethics of belief for the nature of belief. By an ‘ethics of belief’, we mean an account of what it is to form and hold one’s beliefs responsibly, praiseworthily, or blameworthily. Thus, the aim is to lay out some implications of such an *ethics* of belief for the *metaphysics* of belief.

One might wonder whether it would not be preferable to first answer the question ‘What is a belief?’, before answering questions like ‘Which are our responsibilities with regard to our beliefs?’. For comparison, it would be rather strange to answer the question ‘which are our responsibilities with regard to huffnuffs?’ without first having answered the question ‘what is a huffnuff?’ Our situation with regard to beliefs, however, is not like our situation with regard to huffnuffs. For, whereas none of us has ever seen or experienced a huffnuff, virtually all of us take it for granted that we have beliefs and arguably we have some rough, intuitive ideas of what beliefs are.[[1]](#footnote-1) There is nothing illegitimate about starting from a plausible ethics of belief rather than from a discussion on the exact nature of belief.

As the fierce debates of recent decades make clear, from a theoretical standpoint beliefs remain elusive beasts. Many lines of scrutiny have been devised in order to tease out their nature, but none have met with general acclaim. We hope that a plausible general constraint on an ethics of belief may be seen as a reflection of our general familiarity with the phenomenon of believing, and may thus be taken to embody some tacit knowledge concerning the nature of belief. We intend to make this knowledge explicit through a careful philosophical analysis.

Of course, a different outcome is also imaginable: If the metaphysical implications of any seemingly credible ethics of belief turn out to be utterly implausible, that might cast into doubt the very idea that there is a plausible ethics of belief. Whether in such a scenario we should reject those metaphysical implications about belief or the idea that there is a plausible ethics of belief is a delicate question the answer to which would depend on the precise outcome and the strength of several intuitions. As we shall see below, however, this scenario is not relevant to the present investigation. For, although we shall demonstrate that significant metaphysical commitments follow from an intuitively appealing ethics of belief, arguably those commitments will not be so controversial as to cast doubt on that ethics of belief.

By ‘belief’ we mean, roughly, thinking that some proposition is true or that something is the case. Thus, an ethics of *belief* should be distinguished from an ethics of *related propositional attitudes*, such as acceptance. For, one can accept that *p* (take *p* for granted in one’s theoretical and practical reasoning) without thinking that *p* is true or that *p* is the case.[[2]](#footnote-2) An ethics of *belief* should also be distinguished from the ethics of *what to do with* *our beliefs*. For instance, an ethics of belief as it is here conceived does not deal with the propriety of *expressing* one’s beliefs in various contexts or *inducing others* to believe similarly. It is solely concerned with the evaluation of beliefs as such, or if one prefers, the evaluation of believers merely on the basis of their beliefs.

A stock example of someone’s holding a blameworthy belief is that of the educated racist.[[3]](#footnote-3) The educated racist is an agent who is strongly convinced that members of some ethnic group are inferior, even if she has been confronted with massive evidence to the contrary, and seemingly has had every opportunity to revise her belief accordingly. Here, it seems appropriate to blame the educated racist for believing as she does. Other plausible cases of doxastic blameworthiness abound in daily life. We may blame a babysitter for his careless belief that the child tolerates milk, and so forth[[4]](#footnote-4). This means that we have good grounds for accepting as central to any credible ethics of belief the following principle:

*Blameworthy Beliefs are Common* (BBC)

Many agents with normal mental powers and with lives by no means extraordinary are blameworthy for certain beliefs they hold.

In the rest of this essay, we investigate BBC’s metaphysical implications about belief. In doing so, we leave aside the question of which kind of blameworthiness the principle trades in, e.g. whether it deals in *moral* blameworthiness or a specific kind of *epistemic* blameworthiness. This question is of no immediate importance to our project.[[5]](#footnote-5) We prefer to speak simply of *doxastic* blameworthiness (blameworthiness for belief) in order to stay neutral on that matter.

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2, we argue that it follows from BBC that, contrary to what some philosophers claim, a substantial number of our beliefs are *non-occurrent*. Moreover, we provide some reason to think that, contrary to what a substantial number of philosophers claim, among those non-occurrent beliefs there are not only *dormant* beliefs but also *tacit* beliefs. In section 3, we scrutinize what BBC implies about the individuation of beliefs, i.e. the objects of doxastic blameworthiness. We argue that beliefs cannot always be individuated simply by content. Rather, BBCtogether with certain plausible general principles suggests that sometimes we need to individuate beliefs on the basis of their causal history.

**2. First Metaphysical Implication: There Are Non-Occurrent Beliefs and Some of Them Are Tacit Beliefs**

Some beliefs are conscious states or manifested as such. Such states *can*, but need not play a motivational role. If I see a beer can in the fridge, I will normally also consciously believe that reaching out for it will contribute to reaching my goal of drinking beer. Together with my desire for drinking beer, this belief will motivate me to reach for the can.If you now think about whether you are able to read philosophy papers, you will presumably immediately think that you are and, thereby, consciously believe that you are able to do so. But as long as you do not desire anything relevantly related to this, such as reading a philosophy paper, it will not play a motivational role. In any case, conscious beliefs are often called *occurrent* beliefs.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Some philosophers, such as R.B. Braithwaite and Radu Bogdan, have gone so far as to claim that *all* of our beliefs are occurrent beliefs. On Braithwaite’s view, to believe that *p* requires that one “entertains” *p*, where entertaining *p* is conceived of as something “subjective or phenomenological”.[[7]](#footnote-7) And Bogdan says: “Mine is an account of belief fixation. But, I claim, this is *all* there is to believing, namely, its occurrent fixation. (…) Do we store thoughts as such? Not likely. We manufacture them when we need them. But beliefs *are*, for the most part, thoughts with functional obligations. If you think of beliefs which are not thoughts, you are probably thinking of procedures and behavioural routines, or of modular representations (i.e. raw registrations), or, finally, of memory representations. But none of these, we saw, are beliefs.”[[8]](#footnote-8) According to some philosophers, even David Hume adhered to this view, which is supposed to be evidenced by such quotations as “belief is nothing but a peculiar feeling, different from the simple conception,”[[9]](#footnote-9) but we will not go into Hume exegesis here..

Most philosophers, however, reject the bold assertion that all beliefs are occurrent. Do we not believe that geocentrism is false, even when we are canoeing down a wild river, seemingly having no occurrent thoughts not about stones, currents, or our own safety? In this section, we will pursue a different line of critique on the idea that all of our beliefs are occurrent: It conflicts with BBC, the principle that we formulated above. We will also argue that a plausible ethics of belief implies that, contrary to what many philosophers think, there are at least *two* kinds of belief in addition to *occurrent* belief, which we prefer to call *dormant* and *tacit* belief. (Or, if talking about ‘kinds of belief’ seems problematic to the reader, we argue that we can not only believe propositions occurrently, but also dormantly and tacitly.) Below, we indicate in more detail what we mean by ‘dormant’ and ‘tacit’.

Before we do so, let us introduce a second principle, a principle that applies generally, not just to the doxastic realm. It seems that people are responsible for something only if they have some kind of control over it. I am responsible for what I say to my colleagues, for how I treat my neighbors, and for how I spend my money, because those are things over which I have control. I am *not* responsible for the rotation of the earth, for this is a thing over which I lack control. Such control may be direct, as when I choose what to say and what not to say. But such control may also be indirect: We may praise – and, hence, hold responsible – a scientist for a discovery because it is the result of her exercising control over such activities as gathering scientific evidence, even if she did not and could not foresee that she would make this discovery as a result of her work. More formally, a general principle can be formulated as follows:

*Responsibility Requires Control*

Some person *S* is responsible for *ϕ*-ing only if *S* has or had some kind of direct or indirect control over *ϕ*-ing.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The literature on the ethics of belief displays a wide variety of ideas concerning how such control or influence should be understood in the case of belief. These ideas need not concern us here, though. All we need for our argument is what virtually all philosophers in the ethics of belief debate agree on, namely that responsibility for belief, like responsibility for anything else, requires some kind of direct or indirect control.

Now, with *Responsibility Requires Control* in the back of our minds, let us consider the following example. A minister of defense has some reason to think that large-scale fraud has been perpetrated in the army. A committee is formed which studies the presumed fraud in detail and writes a long report about the situation, which they hand over to him. The minister, however, spends most of his time relaxing on the beach behind his house, enjoying the sun and eating pizzas. Consequently, he does not read a single letter of the report. As a result of that, he is ignorant of the fraud. For instance, he holds certain false beliefs about the army, beliefs for which he might nonetheless have good evidence, as long as he does not read the dossier. It seems clear that the minister of defense is *blameworthy* for these false beliefs.

In virtue of what is he blameworthy for that? Well, in virtue of the fact that, as the minister of defense, he had an obligation to read the dossier. However, he violated that obligation without a good excuse. He easily could and should have read the report, but culpably did not and, consequently, his false beliefs also seem culpable. (He seems blameworthy for his false beliefs and ignorance in virtue of his indirect control over that.) There is nothing uncommon about this scenario: people are often blameworthy for their beliefs in virtue of failing to control them, say, by gathering further evidence. E.g. the police are blameworthy for their false beliefs concerning a murder if they could and should have investigated the matter more carefully. This leads us to the first premise of our argument:

1. We are frequently blameworthy for our beliefs in virtue of culpably failing to exercise control over them. [BBC & *Responsibility Requires Control*]

The second premise of the argument is the following:

1. If all beliefs are occurrent, then we are hardly ever blameworthy for our beliefs in virtue of culpably failing to exercise control over them.

This leads, of course to the conclusion that:

1. At least some of our beliefs are non-occurrent. [from (1) and (2); *modus tollens*]

The crucial premise that needs defense here, then, is premise (2). That this premise is plausible can be seen as follows. Consider the minister of defense at the time at which he violates his obligation to read the report. There seem to be different options with regard to his doxastic attitude vis-à-vis the fact that he should read the dossier. First, it is possible that he is fully aware, that is, *occurrently believes* that he should read the dossier, but that he succumbs to the temptation to go to the beach, due to weakness of will. That would, of course, be an instance of acting against one’s better judgment or, in one word, ‘*akrasia*’, where ‘akrasia’ can be understood as follows’:

*Akrasia*

Some person *S* at some time *t* in *φ*-ing suffers from akrasia if and only if (i) *S* at *t* *φ*-s and (ii) *S* at *t* occurrently believes that *S* should not *φ* at *t*.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Someone who acts from *akrasia* succumbs to a temptation: she realizes full well that she should not do something, but does it nonetheless, or she realizes that she should do something but fails to do it nonetheless. Those who believe, like Braithwaite, that all of our beliefs are occurrent are probably *committed* to the above account of *akrasia*, for it follows from their view that if *akrasia* is to be spelled out in terms of belief, it has to be spelled out in terms of *occurrent* belief. However, it is widely claimed that *akrasia* is rare. Moreover, it seems that the minister can properly be blamed for not reading the file and for his ensuing false beliefs, even if he does not occurrently (consciously) believe that he should read the file. If he is aware that he should read the file, but does not consider the matter, it seems that he is still blameworthy. If we are to maintain BBC, then, arguably, we should look for further options with regard to the minister’s doxastic attitude, apart from that of occurrent belief. We do not regard it as a decisive objection that even if cases of *akrasia* are rare and exotic, such cases could still give rise to a vast amount of blameworthy beliefs, thus satisfying BBC. We maintain that plausibly BBC should be understood so as to imply that in typical cases of doxastic blameworthiness, we should not expect anything exotic or unusual to have occurred.

A second option as to the doxastic attitude of the minister is that he is *ignorant* that he should read the file.[[12]](#footnote-12) Now, if the minister is *ignorant* that he should read the dossier, we cannot properly blame the minister for that ignorance or for the action based on his ignorance (not reading the file) unless he had control over his ignorance. So, if he is to be blameworthy for his ignorance, he must have been able to exercise control over it. The problem, however, is that we can ask the same question that we are asking about the minister’s not reading the dossier, about the minister’s exercise of control over his ignorance. We seem to have the same options. First, he could have failed to exercise proper control over his ignorance due to *akrasia*, but that, as we said, is rare. Second, he could have failed to exercise proper control due to ignorance that he should exercise such control. But if that is the case, then we could ask the same question about *that* piece of ignorance. And so on. Hence, this second option leads to an infinite regress.[[13]](#footnote-13) This suffices to establish (2). It follows that if BBCis to be tenable, there ought to be a third option concerning the doxastic attitude of the minister of defense at the time at which he fails to read the dossier.

There is indeed a third option: he *non-occurrently* believes that he should read the dossier. This seems to be the only option left. For, with regard to any true proposition *p*, one either *believes* that *p*, or *disbelieves* that *p* (an instance of ignorance), *suspends judgment* on *p* (another instance of ignorance), or one is *deeply ignorant* of *p* (a final variety of ignorance). This exhausts the options, in so far as we define ‘suspending judgment’ as neither believing nor disbelieving a proposition that one has considered to some relevant extent[[14]](#footnote-14) and ‘being deeply ignorant’ as neither believing nor disbelieving nor suspending judgment on a true proposition.

Those who admit non-occurrent beliefs have no trouble to make sense of scenarios like these. They could say, for instance, that the minister does indeed *believe* that he should read the file, but that he goes to the beach anyway. He is blameworthy, not because of acting from *akrasia* (because he does not act against an occurrent belief and, hence, does not act from *akrasia*), but because he acts against his *dormant* beliefs. In order to make sense of the fact that we are sometimes blameworthy for our beliefs in virtue of (not) exercising control over them, then, we should admit that there are not only occurrent, but also non-occurrent beliefs.

This point can be made even more vividly for cases of *forgetting*. Imagine that one of the congress members has pointed out to the minister time and again that he should read the file this evening. However, when he comes home, the minister completely forgets about it and goes to the beach. Let us assume that there are no abnormal, excusing circumstances, such as his wife’s being seriously ill or his having a brain tumor which causes memory loss. Clearly, in such a normal scenario, he is blameworthy for failing to read the file and for his ensuing false beliefs on the large-scale fraud in the army.

Now, in virtue of what is he blameworthy in this alternative scenario? The occurrentist cannot say that he is blameworthy for not reading the file in virtue of his *belief* that he should read the file. For, if all beliefs are occurrent, then the minister of defense at the time he gets home and decides to go to the beach, clearly does *not* believe that he should read the file.

The occurrentist could reply that the minister is blameworthy for not reading the report and for his ensuing false beliefs because *at an earlier time* he occurrently believed that he should read the file but later forgot that he should. But this response is problematic. There seem to be two ways in which one can forget something. First, it is possible that while one previously believed that *p*, one no longer believes that *p*. For instance, if one were to ask the minister of defense whether he should read the report, he would honestly say something like: “Not that I am aware of.” It is hard to see how we could blame the minister for not reading the file if his previous belief that he should read the file has somehow mysteriously been erased from his set of beliefs. A second and more plausible option is that he *still believes* that he should read the file, but that he does not *occurrently* believe it; he does not think about it, he does not consider whether he should read the file. But this would in fact be to *acknowledge* that there are non-occurrent beliefs.

The occurrentist may retort that the minister is blameworthy for failing to read the file because he *had a disposition* occurrently to believe that he should read the file. However, it is hard to see how merely having a disposition occurrently to believe something could render us blameworthy. Take the famous example of Frege. Frege believed that for any property *P*, there is a set whose members are all and only those objects that have *P.* He called this proposition *basic law V*. Bertrand Russell, however, showed that this proposition is false: for the property of being non-self-membered there is no set whose members are all and only those objects that have that property.Now, it is plausible that, given his impressive logical skills, if Frege had so much as considered the proposition *q* that the property of being non-self-membered provides a refuting counterexample to this basic law, he would have believed it. But if he had believed it, he would not have accepted his basic law V. Yet he did. Therefore, he did not believe that *q*, even though he had a disposition occurrently to believe that *q*. Obviously, it would be strange to blame Frege for anything merely on the basis of his having this doxastic disposition. For, certainly, as long as this exact disposition was not triggered, it had no influence on his thoughts or conduct whatsoever.

The occurrentist, then, has insufficient resources to explain why the minister is blameworthy for failing to read the file and also for his ensuing ignorance and false beliefs. The philosopher who also admits non-occurrent beliefs, however, has no such problem. She can say that the minister *believes* and *knows* that he should read the file, but that he culpably forgets about it. That explanation of the minister’s situation matches well with the verdict that one is inclined to give on this situation.

So far, we have argued that a plausible ethics of belief provides us with good reason to think that there are non-occurrent beliefs. This is not highly controversial; there are only a few philosophers, such as R.B. Braithwaite, Radu Bogdan, and maybe David Hume, who claim that all of our beliefs are occurrent. We would now like to defend a more controversial claim, namely that a plausible ethics of belief suggests that non-occurrent beliefs come in two varieties: dormant beliefs and tacit beliefs. How precisely these two ways of believing a proposition should be spelled out is controversial. We offer the following account. *Dormant* beliefs are beliefs that we have because we have actively considered a proposition in the past and ever since taken it to be true. Thus, we dormantly believe that there is a distinction between the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*, and that the World Trade Center was subject to a terrorist attack on September 11th 2001, for these are things we have considered in the past and ever since taken to be true, whether or not we have occurrently thought about it in the meanwhile.[[15]](#footnote-15)

*Tacit* beliefs are beliefs in propositions that we have never considered, yet would clearly seem to believe in any standard sense of ’belief’. Thus, we tacitly believe that we are less than five hundred feet tall, that we are less than five hundred six feet tall, that we exist longer than two days, that we exist longer than two days and three minutes, and so forth. One reason to embrace the claim that we have tacit beliefs is the following: It seems false to say that we *do* *not know* that we are less than five hundred six feet tall and since knowledge entails belief, we *believe* that we are less than five hundred six feet tall, even if we have never thought about that.[[16]](#footnote-16) Some philosophers, such as William Lycan and Eric Schwitzgebel,[[17]](#footnote-17) agree that we have such tacit beliefs. However, other philosophers, such as Robert Audi and Pierre Le Morvan,[[18]](#footnote-18) are not impressed by putative examples and maintain that all of our beliefs are either occurrent or dormant.

With this in mind, let us consider a revised version of the scenario that we used in this section. This time, the minister does not believe that he should read the file. He is the person who thinks that it is perfectly fine to spend a day on the beach rather than reading important files when he feels like he needs a bit of sunshine. He comes home and without considering the matter, he puts his bag in his study and leaves for the beach. It seems clear that in this scenario as well, we deem him blameworthy for not studying the file and for his ensuing false beliefs. But in virtue of what can we properly blame him for these things? Well, in virtue of his *blameworthy belief* that it is alright for him to spend the rest of the day on the beach. But notice that he does not *occurrently* believe that: he does not consciously ponder whether or not it is alright to spend the rest of the day on the beach; he simply takes off for the beach without giving it a thought. Nor does he *dormantly* hold this belief: he has never asked himself whether it is alright to spend the rest of *this* day on the beach. The only route left, then, is to acknowledge that, in addition to *occurrent* and *dormant* beliefs, there are *tacit* beliefs. It is in virtue of his tacit belief that it is perfectly fine to spend the rest of the day on the beach rather than reading the file – a belief which is culpable, which he should not have had – that we can properly blame him for failing to read the file and for his ensuing ignorance and false beliefs.

That there are not only occurrent and dormant beliefs, but also tacit beliefs is an important metaphysical conclusion. It implies that the scope of our beliefs if much larger than many philosophers have acknowledged. In fact, it means that we have an infinite number of beliefs. We believe, for instance, that we are less than five hundred six feet tall, less than five hundred seven feet tall, and so forth. And this, in turn, implies that belief states cannot be brain states, at least not if brain states are complex material events or complex material structures. They cannot be complex material events, for there is no special event going on when I believe non-occurrently that I am less than five hundred seven feet tall. And they cannot be complex material structures, such as stored representations, for no matter how complex the brain is, given that it is a finite material object, the number of possible material structures is limited, whereas the number of tacit beliefs we hold is infinite.

We conclude that a plausible ethics of belief, that is, an ethics of belief which comprises BBC, implies – at least, in conjunction with the plausible idea that responsibility requires control – that there are not only occurrent beliefs, but also non-occurrent beliefs and that such non-occurrent beliefs come in at least two varieties: dormant and tacit beliefs. There might well be other strategies to reach these same conclusions, especially the strategy of providing counter-examples. Since not all philosophers find those counter-examples convincing, we have provided a different strategy: we have reached these conclusions by deriving them from a credible ethics of belief, in conjunction with a general plausible principle about responsibility and control.

**3. Second Metaphysical Implication: Beliefs Are Not Only Individuated by Content**

Orthodoxy has it that beliefs – we mean belief-types – are individuated by *content*. This means that for any belief which a subject might hold, having a distinct propositional content is necessary and sufficient for that belief’s being distinct from the subject’s other beliefs. For instance, at any time I can hold at most one belief that the sun is yellow. And if in another possible world I also believe that the sun is yellow, that world necessarily counts as similar to the actual world in that I hold the same belief in both worlds.[[19]](#footnote-19)

In this section we shall show that, given the acceptance of certain plausible general principles (principles that are not restricted to an ethics of *belief*), the idea that beliefs are to be individuated merely by content clashes with a credible ethics of belief. At least in some contexts we need to individuate a subject’s belief states in a different manner. The first of these principles is this:

*Contrast*

Whenever *S* is blameworthy for *ϕ*-ing, *S* is blameworthy for *ϕ*-ing rather than (*ψ*-ing, which implies) *not* *ϕ*-ing.

The second principle is this:

*Control*

In any situation *X*, *S* is blameworthy for *ϕ*-ing rather than (*ψ*-ing, which implies) *not* *ϕ*-ing only if *S* could have brought it about that in *X*, *S* did *not* *ϕ* rather than *ϕ.*[[20]](#footnote-20)

The *Contrast* principle seems like an attractive specification of what one is blameworthy for, when one is blameworthy for something. It simply seems highly strange to maintain that Jane is to blame for stealing a bicycle, while denying that Jane is blameworthy for stealing it rather than not stealing it. *Control* on the other hand seems justified by general considerations of fairness. It seems grossly unfair to blame someone by pointing to a contrasting outcome that was never a real option for her. Thus, denying either principle would seem very costly.[[21]](#footnote-21) If beliefs are individuated by content, *Contrast* and *Control* jointly yield:

*Ability to Believe Otherwise*

For any situation *X*, if *S* is blameworthy for believing that *p* in *X*, then *S* could have brought it about that in *X*, she did not believe that *p*.

We shall now argue that *Ability to Believe Otherwise* conflicts with BBC. BBC forces us to acknowledge cases like that of the educated racist as cases of blameworthy belief. If cases like that of the educated racist cannot count as cases of blameworthy belief, surely blameworthy belief would be a highly exotic phenomenon.

Presume that our educated racist believes merely on the basis of her general bias against all non-Caucasians that dark-skinned citizens of her country commit more crimes than fair-skinned citizens. This belief of hers is a blameworthy belief, if anything is. Now, suppose that the educated racist could *not* have believed otherwise. Imagine, for instance, that if she had failed to form her racist belief on the basis of her bias, external factors would have conspired to make it the case that she formed a belief with that content anyway. Here, we could evoke a fiendish operator with the ability to change the racist’s beliefs through a device secretly installed in her brain. But we need not go to such bizarre extremes. Suppose a radio show featuring a respected and clearly reliable criminologist was actually running in the background, when the racist formed her belief out of racial prejudice. In the actual situation, the racist’s forming her racist belief on the matter induced her not to pay attention to the radio show. But, had she not been forming that belief, she would have paid attention to the radio show. Now, imagine that the respected criminologist gives evidence for the same proposition, namely that dark-skinned citizens are more criminal. This means that even if she had not violated her obligation and had not formed her belief on the basis of her racial bias, she would have formed the belief that dark-skinned citizens are more criminal. Only, in this counterfactual scenario, she would have formed it on a good basis (reliable testimony) rather than a bad basis (her blameworthy racial bias).[[22]](#footnote-22)

In this situation, the racist could not have avoided believing that dark-skinned citizens are more criminal. Whether or not she meets her obligations, she ends up believing the same proposition, namely that dark-skinned citizens are more criminal. We could even add that the entire scenario plays out in a prison, where the racist is powerless to have been elsewhere or have turned off the radio, and that her dispositions to listen to the radio show and to form beliefs on the criminologist’s testimony are hard-wired ones. In sum, in the situation right after the radio show finishes, the racist is really powerless to believe otherwise.[[23]](#footnote-23) If we have to respect *Ability to Believe Otherwise*, given the circumstances described, the educated racist’s actual belief out of prejudice is blameless, because she could not believe otherwise. This, however, seems clearly false.

The point is that, intuitively, the counterfactual circumstances described above are insignificant to whether or not the agent is doxastically blameworthy in the actual scenario as described. It seems unfair to let the educated racist get off the hook, simply because the circumstances conspired to make it the case that she would have believed anyway that dark-skinned citizens are more criminal. This is because it seems that the counterfactual circumstances ensuring this had absolutely nothing to do with the way she actually formed her belief, namely out of racist bigotry. What seems relevant to her doxastic blameworthiness is the way she actually formed her belief, not the exotic ways by which she could have formed a belief with a similar content, had she failed to form the belief as she actually did.

But this means that we cannot fairly acquit the racist of doxastic blame in a case where the apparatus was in place to counterfactually ensure that she believed the content anyway, and uphold her blameworthiness in more typical cases in which she believed out of bigotry, but in which this apparatus was not in place. If we are to respect BBC, we must deem the racist blameworthy for her belief, even if she could not have believed otherwise. In conclusion, if we are to respect BBC, either *Control*, *Contrast*, or belief-individuation by content must go. But since *Control* and *Contrast* are each strong principles motivated by general concerns (concerns not specific to the doxastic realm), it seems that belief-individuation by content must yield. Some might object here, that *Control* should go. However, this seems a steep price to pay, given that there are solutions to the problem at hand which tinker only with individuation principles. Also, sacrificing *Control* at this stage while keeping up *Contrast* would allow us to say that in the above Frankfurt-style scenario, the educated racist is blameworthy for believing that dark-skinned people are more criminal rather than not believing that dark-skinned people are more criminal. And that seems a very odd thing to say, given that the racist could not have failed to believe that content. In order to prevent this dire consequence, one would have to sacrifice not only *Control*, but *Contrast* as well. At this stage we suspect that the scales are heavily tipping in favor of giving up belief-individuation by content instead, at least for the purposes of deontic assessment. Having abandoned this idea, we may then proceed to present a more agreeable and neutral version of *Ability to Believe Otherwise*, one in terms of belief-particulars. For now, suffice it to say that belief-particulars are entities that have at least part of their causal history essentially.

*Ability to Believe Otherwise\**

In any situation *X* in which *S* is blameworthy for her belief-particular that *p*, *S* could have brought it about that in *X*, *S* did not hold that belief-particular.

This principle is motivated by the following instantiations of *Contrast* and *Control*:

*Contrast\**

Whenever *S* is blameworthy for holding a belief-particular that *p*, *S* is blameworthy for holding that belief-particular that *p* rather than not holding that belief-particular that *p*.

*Control\**

In any situation *X*, *S* is not blameworthy for holding a belief-particular that *p* rather than not holding that belief-particular that *p*, unless *S* could have brought it about that in *X*, *S* did not hold that belief-particular that *p* rather than holding that belief-particular that *p*.

One may still colloquially say that an agent is blameworthy *for believing that p* in cases like that of the educated racist. However, given the demise of belief-individuation by content and assuming that we want to respect *Contrast* and *Control*, this is, strictly speaking, either false or merely indicating that the agent is blameworthy for holding a belief-particular that *p*. For, in order to be blameworthy for believing the content of the proposition *p* in such a case, given *Control* one should have been able to avoid believing that content. Of course, this is not to deny that *in other cases* cognitive subjects may be blameworthy for believing the content of a certain proposition. Nothing we have said so far rules this out. However, we shall not discuss such scenarios here. Our central point is merely that, given BBC*,* central cases of doxastic blameworthiness require us to conceive of the object of doxastic blame in a manner that individuation by content alone cannot offer.

The question now arises precisely how we are to individuate belief-particulars, so that *Ability to Believe Otherwise\** is satisfied in cases like that of the educated racist. Here, it pays off to look once again at non-actualized possibilities pertaining to the situations in which agents believe blameworthily. Clearly, belief-particulars in such cases must be individuated in such a way as to make it impossible to play the kind of Frankfurtian tricks we played above. Or to specify this as a criterion:

*Criterion for Belief Individuation*

If *S* is blameworthy for her belief-particular, but there is nothing *S* could have done to avoid her belief-particular’s exemplifying properties P1, P2, …P*n*, then P1, P2, …P*n* cannot individuate *S*’s belief-particular for the purpose of evaluating *S*’s blameworthiness for her belief-particular.

This in itself is a substantial metaphysical commitment derived from BBC together with only a few principles motivated on independent grounds of general fairness. For, arguably, this *Criterion for Belief Individuation* could be applied generally in the doxastic realm and not just in cases in which one is blameworthy or praiseworthy for one’s belief. After all, it would be strange to insist that the way we individuate beliefs in contexts of deontic assessment is entirely irrelevant to belief individuation in other contexts.

Above, we saw that in scenarios like that of the educated racist, the property of having a specific content *p* fails to meet the *Criterion for Belief Individuation* that we formulated above. Fortunately, there are other properties that *do* meet this criterion. Consider, for instance, the property of holding a belief that *p* merely on the basis on racist bigotry. Here, it is far from clear that the educated racist could be held equally blameworthy for her belief-particular that dark-skinned citizens are more criminal, if literally she could not have avoided holding a belief with this content on the basis of racist bigotry. A plausible explanation for such unavoidability would be that her racist bigotry was pathological and inescapable. If this were the case, wonder (or even pity) would be a more appropriate attitude than resentment.

Clearly, our discussion here has merely allowed us to reject a certain candidate for belief-particular individuation in a specific context. We cannot on this basis establish the correctness of any particular criterion for belief individuation. All we can do is establish a criterion that passes our test for adequacy in typical contexts of doxastic blameworthiness. Still, our discussion seems to suggest that belief-particulars are appropriately individuated for such contexts simply on the basis of whatever renders them blameworthy or blameless (of course, it is not thereby suggested that this deontic status plays in itself any individuating role). Although we cannot argue the point in detail, we wish to suggest that this status is constituted by a certain part of the belief-particular’s causal history.

Obviously, it would be nice to say something more precise on that part of a belief-particular’s causal history, which determines its deontic status. However, doing this would require us to settle a controversial issue regarding the nature of doxastic blame. Here, one could take at least two different positions. The first of those we find inherent in the work of W.K. Clifford, who famously suggested that it is “wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence”[[24]](#footnote-24). Call this “The evidence norm”. This norm implies that we are always in breach of a doxastic obligation if we hold any belief on insufficient evidence.[[25]](#footnote-25) Here, plausibly the relevant threshold of evidence sufficiency must be construed as somehow context-sensitive, even though Clifford goes out of his way to stress that in his opinion it is very exacting even in the humblest of contexts.[[26]](#footnote-26) Further, Clifford is naturally read as suggesting that in the following sense the evidence norm is the *unique master norm* governing doxastic blameworthiness: First, if we have duties pertaining to evidence-gathering and evidence-sensitivity, those duties are derived from the evidence norm; those duties pertain to things we ought to do only in order to live up to the evidence norm. Second, as long as our doxastic states live up to the evidence norm, they are in the clear. Breaches of derivative duties of evidence-gathering and evidence-sensitivity are only relevant to the question of doxastic blame, in so far as they may explain why the blameworthy belief did not live up to the evidence norm. On this picture a belief-particular is blameworthy roughly if it is of poor epistemic quality (insufficiently grounded), where this poorness is the fault of the doxastic agent. Poor epistemic quality may be up to the agent, e.g. in so far as it results from breaches of derivative norms of proper evidence-gathering.[[27]](#footnote-27)

A view radically different from that attributed to Clifford above is this: There are no master norms governing doxastic blameworthiness, which concern duties to believe only so as to satisfy a certain epistemic standard. Rather, doxastic blame derives from breaches of a family of duties pertaining to intellectual activity. Those duties are not duties to hold specific beliefs, nor are they derived from any particular epistemic standard pertaining to belief. They are either basic or derived merely from an over-all basic obligation to pursue a true picture of the world we inhabit. On this view, a belief-particular is blameworthy roughly in so far as the agent holds it rather than does not hold it, as a result of a breach of her basic intellectual obligations, even if that belief is based on strong evidence.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Obviously, deciding between such rival substantial accounts of doxastic blame would violate the commitment of this paper to derive its metaphysical conclusions merely on the basis of fairly uncontroversial constraints on a credible ethics of belief. We have moved far beyond folk theoretical territory here. However, one’s choice of theory does have consequences with regard to the question how to individuate belief-particulars so as to satisfy our *Criterion of Belief Individuation*. E.g. on the second view, having breaches of evidence-gathering obligations in its causal past always matters to a belief-particular’s blameworthiness, whereas on the first view sometimes such a causal past does not matter, as long as one has sufficient evidence for the ensuing belief. Consequently, in this paper we shall be content merely to offer as essential properties of a belief-particular those parts of the present belief’s causal history which determine its status as blameworthy or blameless, whatever those parts exactly may turn out to be.

Even this minimal account is not without metaphysical consequence. To give an example: If a believer maintains belief in a certain proposition but radically shifts her base for believing it, she really does not retain her original belief-particular, but rather replaces or supplements it with a new belief-particular with a similar or even the same propositional content. If, for instance, as a small boy I believe that my father is the world’s strongest man out of sheer admiration, and as a slightly older boy believes that my father is the world’s strongest man based on seeing him win an international strong man contest, I form a new belief in some sense of the word, even if continuously I held a belief that my father is the world’s strongest man. This is because, on any respectable account, the causal history of my believing the proposition that my father is the world’s strongest man, has shifted so drastically that the causal history of my original belief is now entirely irrelevant to the deontic status of my present belief-state.

Of course, this is not to deny that in many contexts, the primary property of a belief that should interest us is its propositional content. For instance, if I want to predict whether my wife goes to the fridge when she desires a beer, it usually suffices to investigate whether she holds some belief with the content that there is beer in the fridge. Knowing what belief-*particulars* people hold, which implies knowing relevant parts of the causal histories of those beliefs, *may* be relevant to predicting their behavior, though. For instance, it may be helpful to predict the likelihood that they will gather more evidence in certain circumstances. Moreover, our interests in other human beings extend far beyond that of predicting their behavior. We also want to know whether they are sensible cognizers whom we can rely on for information and very often we simply want to know whether they are likeable characters with whom we can form bonds of trust, friendship, and love. Here, differences between various belief-particulars matter and our ethics of belief reflects this fact: In such contexts our verdicts may depend crucially on whether our fellow humans are doxastically blameworthy along the lines of typical cases like that of the educated racist. Belief is at the heart of humanity. We should not let our metaphysics of belief be guided only by a paradigm in which no differences matter except those relevant for prediction and manipulation.

**4. Conclusion**

Any plausible ethics of belief must respect that normal agents are doxastically blameworthy for their beliefs in a range of non-exotic cases. We have argued, first, that together with independently motivated principles this constraint leads us to reject occurrentism as a general theory of belief. Second, we must acknowledge not only dormant beliefs, but tacit beliefs as well. Third, a plausible ethics of belief leads us to acknowledge that a difference in propositional content cannot in all contexts count as a criterion for belief individuation. In some contexts, we need to individuate beliefs in a different manner, namely in such a way that they have at least part of their causal history essentially. Perhaps many further interesting metaphysical theses pertaining to belief are derivable from a credible ethics of belief. In any case, on the minimal assumption that our ethics of belief reflects our tacit understanding of the phenomenon of believing, it provides us with important clues as to the nature of belief. We have done our best to delineate some of the most pertinent of those metaphysical implications.[[29]](#footnote-29)

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1. Belief eliminativists are rare. For a famous instance, see Churchland (1981). For a consideration of eliminativism, see the introduction to the present volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For more on acceptance and how it differs from belief, see Cohen (1989, 368). Something similar applies to what Keith Frankish calls ‘opinion’; see Frankish (1998, 432). We choose here to ignore the suggestion of Frankish(2004, 130-136) that some beliefs are really acceptances. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, Steup (2000), Russell (2001), Nottelmann (2007, 3), and Peels (2012, 45). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nottelmann(2007, Chapter 1) argues that we also need the notion of doxastic blameworthiness in order to make sense of the intuitive blameworthiness of certain severe harm-doings, e.g. cases of negligent rape. Arguably, violent rape is the most severe crime, for which a belief-in-consent-of-the-victim defense has often been attempted in courts of law, even sometimes successfully. Such trials have spurned widespread public controversy, and even led to drastic reforms of established legal systems. This shows the wider legal and social relevance of an ethics of belief. See ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Nottelmann (2011a) for a tentative defense of the position that epistemic blameworthiness is at bottom nothing but moral blameworthiness, everything epistemic considered. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Note, however, that William Lycan has elsewhere defined ‘occurrent beliefs’ slightly stronger, namely as beliefs which are explicit representations in the cognitive system (see Lycan (1986, 63-64)). Such beliefs are also often referred to as “explicit beliefs” (e.g. Carruthers, this volume). Unlike Lycan, we shall remain neutral on the issue of whether all occurrent beliefs are explicit in this sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Braithwaite (1967, 30-31, 35-36) Here is how Braithwaite analyses belief: “My thesis is that ‘I believe one of these propositions *p*’, where believe is used in the sense of actual belief and not of a disposition to believe, means the conjunction of the two propositions: (1) I entertain *p* (where entertainment is similarly used of an actual mental state and not of a disposition to entertain), and (2) I have a disposition to act as if *p* were true.” (p. 30) It is the first condition, (1), which makes Braithwaite’s account of belief an instance of occurrentism. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bodan (1986, 179). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Hume (1978, 624). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. One might think that praiseworthiness – especially praiseworthiness for belief – is an exception to this principle. Thus, one might think that praiseworthiness for *ϕ*-ing does not require any control over *ϕ*-ing. We think that this is false; see Booth and Peels (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. A definition along these lines is quite common. See, for instance, Audi (1979, 177); Mele (1987, 109); Zimmerman (2008, 175). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. More precisely, such ignorance seems to come in three varieties: he could *falsely believe* that he has no obligation to read the dossier, he could *suspend judgment* on whether he should read the dossier, and he could be *deeply ignorant* that he should read the dossier, for instance, because he cannot even grasp the proposition that he should read the file (although this seems unlikely, given that he is a minister). For a defense of the idea that ignorance comes in those three varieties, see Peels (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. One of us has also discussed such a regress elsewhere. See Peels (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The qualification “to some relevant extent” is called for, since it seems that one does not suspend judgment on *p,* if one has just begun considering whether *p*. As we here use the term, one is simply deeply ignorant of *p* in such a case, where perhaps it would be more accurate to say that one has just begun escaping deep ignorance. However, nothing essential hinges on this in the present context. We thank Anthony Booth for bringing this problem to our attention. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Thus, the distinction between dormant and tacit belief is close to that, made by William Lycan, between stored beliefs and being disposed to store as a belief (see Lycan (1986, 64)). In previous writing one of us have suggested that *S* *dormantly* believes that *p* at *t* if and only if (i) *S* at *t* does not consider whether *p*, (ii) the last time *t\** at which *S* considered whether *p*, *S* thought that *p*, and (iii) at any time between *t\** and *t*, including *t* itself, if *S* were to consider whether *p*, *S* would normally think that *p*. See Peels (2012, 24). Of course, there are exceptional situations, circumstances in which one is distracted, circumstances in which one has severe brain damage, and circumstances in which too many belief dispositions are activated at the same time for *S* to think that *p* is true. The word ‘normally’ in the analysis is supposed to exclude such circumstances. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Peels (2012, 24) suggests that *S* tacitlybelieves that *p* at *t* if and only if (i) *S* at *t* does not occurrently or dormantly believe that *p*, (ii) from *S*’s perspective, *p* obviously follows from propositions that *S* occurrently or dormantly believes at *t*, and(iii) if *S* at *t* were to consider whether *p*, *S* would normally think that *p*. Frege did not tacitly believe that the property of being non-self-membered provides a counter-example to his Basic Law V, for he would be surprised by its truth if he were to consider that proposition and in that sense that proposition was not *obviously* true for him. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See, Lycan (1986, 61); Schwitzgebel (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Audi (1994); Le Morvan (2011, 338-341) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Note that by ‘belief’ we mean here to talk about a psychological phenomenon, an attitude towards a proposition. There is a sense of ‘belief’ in which a belief is simply a propositional content. Q: What is your belief about the election? A: That the president will win! This is not the sense of ‘belief’ relevant here. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Those familiar with the literature on responsibility and alternate responsibilities will immediately think of Harry Frankfurt’s work here. We shall deal with examples in Frankfurt’s vein below. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Still, see Owens (2000) for a thoroughgoing rejection of *Control* as relevant to a credible ethics of belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For further discussion of cases like these, see Peels 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This example is lifted from Nottelmann (2007, 161-163). It is heavily inspired by Harry G. Frankfurt’s famous examples in his classical Frankfurt (1969) and the later adaptations of such examples to cover *consequences* of actions and omissions in Fischer and Ravizza (1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Clifford (1999, 77). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Clifford intends a strong deontic sense of “wrong”. This he makes perfectly clear by claiming that the life of an agent in permanent breach of the evidence norm is “one long sin against mankind” (1999,77). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. E.g., he argues that “no simplicity of mind, no obscurity of station, can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe” (1999, 75). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. The account of epistemic blameworthiness developed in Nottelmann (2007) is strongly Cliffordian in spirit. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. A version of this view is developed in Peels (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For their helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay, we would like to thank Anthony Booth, Jeroen de Ridder, Iris Loeb, Stefan Roski, Pieter van der Kolk, Joachim Horvath, Esben Nedenskov Petersen, and René van Woudenberg. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)