

FREEDOM OF BELIEF AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION*

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I

We (rightly) prize what is referred to as freedom of belief and yet there is much disagreement and I suspect confusion about what freedom of belief involves. In the following, I will articulate and partially defend an account of freedom of belief indicating why it is superior to its competitors. With the account in hand, I will show how freedom of belief goes together with access to information and so why, if freedom of belief is valued, access to information should be valued. Indeed, one way of maximizing freedom of belief is by maximizing access to information. Conversely, what will be shown is that depriving persons of access to information constitutes disrespect for and an infringement of their freedom of belief. Part of my aim in the following is to show the link between freedom of belief and the ideal of steering by an objective compass.

II

Having introduced the topic as one concerning “freedom of belief,” I want to suggest that it would be better to think of it in terms of “autonomy of belief” rather than “freedom of belief.” The reason is as follows. The term “freedom” attaches primarily to actions rather than beliefs. And actions are (typically) taken to be free if they are done voluntarily. They are taken to be free if they are done for the agent’s reasons, the agent’s beliefs and desires (and if distinct, values). They are taken to be free if they are within the agent’s control, if they are in accordance with

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her will. There is complexity here. More needs to be added to the conditions specified to get a free action, but at least these features are central even if not sufficient taken on their own.

Beliefs contrast with actions in all these respects. They are not voluntary.¹ They are not done for reasons (at least not typically so). Firstly, they are not actions of ours, not things that we do, and secondly, if reason enters into what we believe, it does so in the form of other beliefs but not (standardly) in the form of desires. Beliefs are not within our direct control, though as will be seen importantly, they can be to a certain degree within our indirect control. And beliefs do not occur in accordance with our will. Rather than comprising actions of ours, beliefs are states that we find ourselves in under certain conditions.

Because of the differences between actions and beliefs, it is better to talk about the “autonomy of belief” rather than the “freedom of belief” and it is crucial that we do not try to model what I refer to as “autonomy of belief” on freedom of action. In that direction ultimately lies incoherence.² It is best to ask under what conditions we believe autonomously rather than believe freely. But, nomenclature aside, there is a real issue here about the conditions under which we believe autonomously despite the differences between beliefs and actions. And it is an issue that has consequences for freedom of action, for the autonomy of belief, suitably understood, is a necessary condition for freedom of and responsibility for action. For the rest of this discussion, I will be talking about autonomy of belief rather than freedom of belief.

But first, I need to back up a bit and indicate why this way of viewing autonomy of belief is superior to perhaps more standard ways of viewing it. I begin by examining two alternative conceptions of autonomy, the first appealing to an indeterministic process in the formation of belief, the second appealing to the will in the formation of belief.

Incompatibilists about freedom and determinism take freedom and determinism to be incompatible: If we are free we cannot be determined; if we are determined, we cannot be free. Determinism is the thesis, at its most general, that holds that the world as it is now, is a function of the way the world was at an earlier time together with the laws of nature. If true, every event can be traced back to some earlier event together with the laws of nature. Every event is, in some appropriate sense, inevitable given earlier events and the laws of nature. Hence, every event is in

¹ For arguments to this effect, see Williams and Leon. B. Williams, “Deciding to Believe,” *Problems of the Self*, (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1973) 136–51; M. Leon, “Rationalising Belief,” *Philosophical Papers* 21 (1992): 299–314.

² Some indication of why this is so follows, but for more on the problems associated with this sort of approach, see M. Leon, “On the Value and Scope of Freedom,” *Ratio* XII (1999): 162–67.

principle predictable given knowledge of the state of the world at the earlier time and the laws of nature.

Determinism is thought by some to offend intuitions about freedom. If determinism is true then our actions can be traced back to earlier factors, to our choices, to our beliefs, desires and values (on which our choices are based), and in turn these too could be traced back to earlier factors, ultimately to factors beyond our control. But then it is asked: How could we be free, for if our actions could be traced back to factors beyond our control, wouldn't the consequences of those factors, including our actions, be beyond our control? This is Ginet's or Van Inwagen's *consequence argument* or Sober's *distant causation* argument.³ Alternatively, if all events including actions are determined, how could we have done otherwise? But if we couldn't do otherwise than we did, how could we be free? This is the *principle of alternative possibilities* as a requirement for freedom. And others argue that if determinism is true then we would not be the ultimate source or originators of our actions, we would not have ultimate responsibility for them. But if we are not ultimately responsible for our actions how could we be free? This is the *principle of ultimate responsibility* as a condition for freedom as proposed by Kane.⁴

As these principles are taken to apply to actions, so they are taken to apply to beliefs. If our beliefs are determined how could we believe freely or autonomously?

Before trying to answer that question we need to consider the alternatives. Libertarians are incompatibilists who think we are free, who think we are not determined. They contrast with hard determinists who think we are not free because we are determined. Both versions of incompatibilism contrast with compatibilism which is the thesis that we can be free and determined, or, as I will argue later, we can be free if determined in the right kind of way. I begin with libertarianism putting the more skeptical hard determinist account aside. Two libertarian accounts present themselves. If determinism is a problem assume indeterminism: So an agent believes autonomously if her beliefs are not determined. Or alternatively, if the worry is that determinism would take control of our beliefs out of our hands, then assume that autonomy of belief requires that beliefs be within our control: So an agent believes autonomously if her beliefs follow her will. I consider these accounts in turn.

On the indeterminist account, an agent believes autonomously if her beliefs are not determined. The account is highly problematic. At a general level, it suffers in

³ C. Ginet, "A Defence of Incompatibilism," *Philosophical Studies* 44 (1983): 391–400. P. Van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983). E. Sober, *Core Questions in Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1995).

⁴ R. Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1998).

the way that all indeterminist accounts suffer in that if determinism takes control out of the agent's hands, indeterminism fails to put control back into the agent's hands. If determinism is true, one event is inevitable given the prior state of the world and the laws of nature. If indeterminism is true, one event is not inevitable given the earlier event and the laws of nature. The formation of belief would not be deterministic but indeterministic. Either the formation would be probabilistic, one event occurring given another event with a certain probability, or it would be random, there being no systematic relation between the earlier event (or state of the world) and the later event (or state of the world). Either way, we would still find ourselves with beliefs rather than being their agents, rather than being the originators of these beliefs. Indeterminism alone fails to put control of non-determined events back in the hands of the agent. Indeterminism alone would fail to ensure that our beliefs are in our hands. As importantly, as will be seen, if beliefs are not determined, they would not be determined by the facts, or by the truth, or by evidence for the truth, but then our beliefs would not be properly grounded. Indeterminism threatens to undermine the epistemic standing of our beliefs, their rationality, their justification, or their warrant.

To repair at least the first problem, we can consider the second account. An agent believes autonomously if her beliefs follow her will. This account is even more problematic. Firstly, as I will simply assert here we do not believe at will (but as indicated earlier, see Williams and Leon for arguments to this end). Try as you might, the way to get yourself to believe some proposition is by way of evidence or reason, not by will alone. For any proposition you wish to believe, you will have to adduce (appropriately plausible) evidence or reasons for thinking it true; willing alone won't do it. Beliefs are states we find ourselves with. They are truth- or evidence- or reason-sensitive representational states that inform our actions. Admittedly, we are imperfect believers. Not all our states meet this characterization to the strongest degree. But they must meet it to an appropriate degree, because beliefs are defined and distinguished from other states by their functional character as indicated.⁵ Admittedly again, the account is more applicable to some of our beliefs than others. Our immediate empirical beliefs are more in the control of the facts and the evidence. With our theoretical scientific beliefs, there is more latitude perhaps for non-evidential factors to intrude. And perhaps there is more latitude again when considering beliefs not answerable to obvious empirical evidence. But even here such beliefs would still be answerable to evidence.⁶ If they

⁵ For arguments on this point, see Davidson and Leon. D. Davidson, "Thought and Talk," *Mind and Language*, ed. S. Guttenplan (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1975) 7–23; M. Leon, "Rationalising Belief" (1992).

⁶ Perhaps beliefs about our own sensory states are exceptions to this. They are not based on or answerable to evidence. Here there is no gap between appearance and reality—a feature that would

are beliefs, they are states we can argue with or argue against. Reason enters into their formation, or their maintenance, or their elimination.

Even if there are non-evidential factors that influence what we believe, the will or what we desire does not play a direct or sufficient role. Even in those areas where beliefs are less subject to obvious evidence, the role of the will is indirect. It influences belief by getting us to focus on certain factors or reasons rather than others. When asked why we believe what we do, we cite the reasons for our believing. We change or get others to change their beliefs (to the extent that we do) by challenging their reasons or providing better ones. Reasons are the currency of belief formation and change. Importantly, though beliefs are not in this way in our direct control, we can affect what we believe indirectly. I will return to this.

There are additional related reasons for rejecting this account. If beliefs are to be formed at will, not only would that interfere with the proper function of the belief system, it would leave the formation of belief unguided or without reason. I take these points in turn.

Beliefs are essentially truth-directed states. Their target is the truth. But then, ideally, beliefs should be produced, if not typically by what is true, then by the evidence we have for the truth or the reasons there are for believing that some proposition is true. The will, if it is to play a role, should be subordinate to this end, otherwise it would interfere with the proper function of the belief system. The role of the will, if there is one, is to put us in the way of the truth or the evidence for the truth or the reasons there are for believing. Its role is not to produce beliefs independently. Anyhow, if the will was to determine what we should believe, what in turn would guide the will? If it were guided by evidence and reason, then its role would be redundant. If, on the other hand, it was not guided by evidence and reason, then it would appear to be simply capricious, without reason. Given the importance of belief, particularly of true belief for our survival in an otherwise dangerous world, agents who formed beliefs at will would have lives that were nasty, brutish and short, to borrow Hobbes' words from a different context.⁷

If these libertarian accounts fail, then what account can be given of autonomous belief? We have some of the elements of a better account in place already. The account of autonomous belief should follow the nature and function of belief systems. Beliefs are truth-directed states. They aim at the truth. Ideally, then, they should be produced, if not by the truth, then evidence for the truth. The account of autonomous belief falls out of this. An agent believes autonomously if her beliefs

account for their apparent incorrigibility. See M. Leon, "Sensations, Error and Eliminative Materialism," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* XXXIV (1996): 83–95.

⁷ T. Hobbes, *Leviathan: Or the Matter, Forme, and Power of a Common-wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill*, ed. Ian Shapiro (Yale: Yale U P, 2010).

track the truth or the evidence for the truth or the reasons for believing that some proposition is true.⁸ In turn, beliefs track the truth or evidence or reason just in case they go where the truth or the evidence or reason goes, such that if the truth or the evidence or reason were different, the beliefs would be different. This—to generalize—reason-tracking account is a species of deterministic account. Autonomous beliefs are beliefs determined in the right kind of way. On the other side, an agent fails to believe autonomously not if her beliefs are determined, but if her beliefs are determined in the wrong way, that is independently of the truth or evidence or reason.

This account is in accord with the cases that we do take to constitute non-autonomous believing. So consider: We take an agent not to believe autonomously where her beliefs are acquired say by brainwashing, or by indoctrination in a context that does not permit critical or evidential reflection; or by manipulation as when the agent is lied to or otherwise deceived; or when the agent's access to evidence is restricted. . . . What all these cases have in common is that beliefs would be formed independently of the truth or evidence or reason. Even where a belief acquired in this way was a true belief, we would not judge the agent to believe autonomously if it were not acquired *because* it was true or *because* of the evidence for its truth or the reasons there were for believing it.

Methodologically, focusing on the cases we do or would take to infringe autonomy of belief is crucial to understanding when beliefs are acquired autonomously. My claim is that when we consider what these features have in common, we can come to discover on the other side what autonomously believing would involve. When beliefs are not produced by their proper determinants, they are not produced autonomously; but when they are produced in the right way by their proper determinants, they are produced autonomously. The agent believes autonomously. As indicated, determinism is not the issue, and it is in fact not used by us in the normal context as a criterion for determining autonomy of belief; rather what we consider is how the belief is determined.

This reason-tracking account not only recognizes infringements of autonomy as a consequence of external constraints or interventions, but it also recognizes that there can be infringements of autonomy because of internal constraints or conditions. For example, persons suffering from extreme forms of dogmatism, from paranoia, or who have belief systems not responsive to evidence, who have lost touch, as it is said, with reality, would not meet the condition for believing autonomously. Instructively, we would not take them to be fully responsible for

⁸ M. Leon, "Believing Autonomously," *Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, Vol 9: Philosophy of Mind and Psychology*, ed. B. Elevitch (2000). This notion of truth-tracking is broadly based on Nozick's notion, see R. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981). Nozick's notion, however, is used in a different context, an epistemological one.

the actions that their beliefs gave rise to (with a qualification to come). The breakdown in these types of cases has an internal rather than an external source. To borrow a characterization from Dennis Stampe and Martha Gibson, such beliefs would be *stuck*, not responsive to their proper determinants.⁹ The feature common to the cases where the agent does not believe autonomously is the failure to acquire beliefs that track the truth or evidence or reason. Again, the judgment we make does not turn on the presence or absence of determinism, it turns on the mode of determination of belief, on how the beliefs are determined or produced. Believing autonomously requires that the belief system functions properly on the internal side while not being manipulated or deceived on the external side.

This account is not only in accord with the nature and function of belief, and in accord with those cases where we do recognize an infringement of an agent's autonomy, but it also provides for appropriate responses or counters to the concerns raised earlier about how determinism would undermine autonomy. I take these concerns in reverse order.

It will be clear, at least for belief, why the condition of ultimate responsibility need not be met for an agent to believe autonomously. The will, as seen, is not the appropriate guide to what we should believe. Either, it would interfere with the proper function of the belief system or its role would be subordinate to the system's proper determinants in which case its direct role would be redundant.

What about the condition of alternative possibilities? Interestingly, suitably understood, this condition can be met on the account that I have proposed. There is disagreement as to how to interpret the condition of alternative possibilities. Consider actions first. On the interpretation favored by incompatibilists, for an agent to act freely it must be the case that on acting she could have done otherwise under identical conditions. So, assume an agent who acts as she does because of her choices, where her choices are based on the reasons she has, her beliefs, desires (and values), and their ordering. She acts, let us say, on her best reasons in that context. The account holds that the capacity to do otherwise must be an unconditional one, that in the very context in which she acted, she could have acted differently. How do we interpret this? The claim is that in some other possible world, identical to this one, in which our agent has a doppelgänger—a counterpart—who is “molecule for molecule” identical to her and so who has the same reasons for acting, with the exact same weighting, the doppelgänger would not act that way or would act differently. If one thinks about it, what is suggested is that the requirement for freedom is a capacity to act irrationally, in a way not in accordance with one's best reasons, in a way that is contrary to one's best reasons, contrary to one's will. That I take it cannot be right.

⁹ D. W. Stampe and M. I. Gibson, “Of One's Own Free Will,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LII (1992): 529–56.

Not all philosophers who think freedom and determinism are compatible agree that alternative possibilities are required for freedom. But those who do would tend to go for a conditional interpretation. They argue that the way in which we should interpret the requirement is conditionally: To hold that the agent could have done otherwise is to hold that the agent would have done otherwise if her choices (or reasons) had been otherwise. This is a species of choice- or want- or more generally again reason-tracking model of free action: She acts freely if her actions follow her choices and reasons and such that had her choices or reasons been different her actions would have been different. On this conditional interpretation, there is no incompatibility between freedom and determinism. An action is free if it goes where the agent's will goes, and would be different if the will were different. This account captures the ordinary notion of acting for a reason. It doesn't require a counter-deterministic capacity for action; it rather requires that actions follow the agent's best or most valued reasons. The account would include normal agents whose actions are appropriately reason responsive, who act for their best or most valued reasons. The account would exclude those whose actions do not follow their best reasons, whose actions are not in this way reason responsive, for example, those with addictive or obsessive or compulsive desires. These are agents who act on desires not in accord with their best or most valued reasons, who act as they do contrary to or independently of their will.¹⁰

This conditional model can be applied instructively to the case of belief. So, it might be held in parallel to the action case that an agent believes autonomously only if on believing she could have believed otherwise.

Now what could that mean? On an unconditional interpretation, it would mean that in the conditions in which she formed a belief based on the evidence available, she could have formed a different belief. Her doppelganger in identical conditions could have believed differently. The consequences of this line of reason are, I think, absurd. For what is being suggested is that one must have the capacity to believe against the evidence or reason in order to believe autonomously.

The better account would be to take the capacity required for autonomous believing to be a conditional one again: The agent believes autonomously just in case she believes what she does because of the evidence available and so would have believed differently if the evidence had been different. Autonomous believers have beliefs that go where the truth or evidence or reason goes.

Importantly, not only would this capture the idea that believing is a rational capacity, but it also gives us a natural stopping point to the tracking condition. Actions need to track choices; choices need to track reasons; and the components

¹⁰ For more on this, see M. Leon, "The Willing Addict: Actor or (Helpless) Bystander?" *Philosophia* 28 (2001): 437–43.

of reasons need to track their proper determinants. In the case of beliefs, these are truth, or evidence, or reason. In the case of desires, these would include the agent's needs and interests. And in the case of values, these would include the "good" if such there be.¹¹ But I will not follow up here on these other contentions.

So, the account of autonomous belief proposed shows why the agent should not be the ultimate source or originator of her beliefs and shows that the requirement of alternative possibilities can be accommodated on the most reasonable interpretation, the conditional one. It also provides an appropriate response to the consequence argument. As long as beliefs are determined by what is true or the evidence for what is true or the reasons there are for believing and as long as they give rise to actions in the right kind of way (an additional condition that I will not take up here), the agent can be said to act freely when acting on her beliefs. Beliefs can be traced back to factors beyond our control, but if they can be traced back to the right factors, the agent on acting on the beliefs can still be acting freely. I very much doubt whether intuition would tell us differently. As shown earlier, the judgment that an agent acts freely is undermined when actions are caused by beliefs that are not acquired in the right way, not by beliefs whose provenance is beyond rational question. That an action was a consequence of a belief acquired because it was true or because of the evidence or the reasons for its truth would not make the action any less free, and would not make the agent any less responsible for her action. Identify the proper determinants for beliefs and in turn actions and the force of the consequence argument is dissipated.

Let me make clear at this point that my focus on the question of autonomy as a philosopher is a focus on the question under what conditions we believe autonomously. That is a conceptual question. My answer is that we believe autonomously when our beliefs are truth-, evidence-, or reason-tracking. It is a distinct empirical question as to whether our beliefs do meet this condition, as to whether we really are autonomous believers. But that is not a question that is addressed here.

III

So far, the account presented of autonomous belief has focused on determinants of belief other than agents, but it might be contested that this leaves out the role of the agent. But do we not sometimes take agents to be responsible for their beliefs, and if so how can that be if agents do not have direct control over their beliefs?

I think it is correct that we do sometimes take agents to be responsible for their beliefs. There is a very important role for the agent and that role is relevant to

¹¹ See Wolf, S. Wolf, *Freedom within Reason* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1990).

whether we take agents to be credit- or blame-worthy for their beliefs, to whether they believe responsibly or not, and so ultimately to whether they are fully responsible for the actions their beliefs inform.¹²

How can the agent's role be accommodated if the agent does not have direct control over her beliefs? The answer is that though agents don't have direct control over their beliefs they do have indirect control: There are things the agent can do that affect what she believes. Indeed, there are things that the agent should do if she is to be a responsible believer. For example, an agent can act so as to maximize the evidence she has on forming her beliefs, to seek out evidence relevant to her beliefs. The epistemically responsible agent will strive to ensure that her beliefs are formed on the basis of "good and suitably extensive evidence." The beliefs we form depend on how we reason on the inferences we make. The epistemically responsible believer will, as appropriate, check her reasoning, her inferences to try to ensure that her beliefs are formed on the basis of valid and sound inferences. The beliefs we form can be affected by our prejudices, perhaps to some extent by what we want to be true. To the extent that this is the case, the epistemically responsible believer will check that her beliefs are not in this way inappropriately affected by her prejudices, her wants. The beliefs we form are strongly affected by others. We believe on their testimony. We rely on experts for many of the beliefs we hold. The epistemically responsible believer will check the reliability or the credentials of those whose testimony or expertise they depend upon. And so on.

We do hold that agents are in part responsible for (certain of) their beliefs. And we do maintain that in certain circumstances the agent could have and should have known better. But these judgments do not depend on agents believing at will. They do not depend on believing being under the direct control of the agent. Rather, they depend on the agent having indirect, non-voluntary control over their beliefs.

Take a concrete case unfortunately close to home. It's a common excuse offered for the support people gave to the morally reprehensible system of apartheid that they acted as they did because of what they believed and they believed what they did because of the way they were educated and brought up. They were taught to believe, for example, in the racial superiority of one group over another. They were taught to believe in the naturalness of group identity. The harm done by apartheid was kept hidden from them, as were the steps that the apartheid government took against the opponents of apartheid. And so on. Their argument is that in the context in which they grew up or lived they could not have known better.

¹² For more on this see M. Leon, "Responsible Believers," *The Monist* 85 (2002): 421–35.

There are reasons for thinking this claim is false. There was evidence aplenty against the doctrine of racial superiority. There was evidence of the possibility of multicultural integration. Evidence was available not only from external sources but also from internal ones about the actions taken by the apartheid government and their effects on the non-chosen people. And so on.

But whether this particular empirical claim is false or not it is clearly compatible with the account that agents can be held responsible for their beliefs. That responsibility turns not on their having direct control of their beliefs, but on their having indirect control and associated responsibilities. If we judge that agents could have and should have believed otherwise, we take them to be blameworthy for their beliefs. If we judge that they could not have known otherwise, we do not hold them responsible. And we can also give agents credit for their beliefs, to the extent that they act in epistemically responsible ways, ensuring their beliefs are formed in the context of sufficient and appropriate evidence, checking their reasoning and inferences, putting aside their prejudices and wants and so on. The indirect control that agents have is control enough to capture our practice of holding agents responsible for their beliefs under certain circumstances. This practice does not require the capacity to believe at will.

The account of autonomous and responsible believing that I have presented points to the idea that autonomy requires that we steer, as it were, by an objective compass. We maximize autonomy to the extent that our beliefs are determined by what is objectively true. This account has implications for the second part of my topic, access to information.

IV

As philosophers, we have a theoretical interest in the question of freedom or autonomy of belief. But this is one of those issues that we all have a practical interest in as well. We value freedom or autonomy of belief. We want it to be respected and we seek its enhancement. We protest when it is undermined as is too often the case even in countries that ostensibly pay respect to it; even in countries with constitutions or practices which value human rights and associated freedoms. So the question becomes what sort of practices can and should be instituted to enhance freedom or autonomy of belief and what sort of practices need to be avoided or opposed in order not to undermine it.

The answers to these questions flow out of the account of autonomy presented. What I have argued is that we should understand it as a truth- or evidence- or reason-tracking capacity. This implies on the one side, with respect to internal features, that we need to provide agents with the relevant reason-enhancing capacities, the capacities that enable them to be better responsive to the truth, evidence, or reason. Education plays a critical role here, whether at the

institutional, familial, or personal level. On the other side, with respect to external features, our capacity to form beliefs is exercised in the context of the information we have or the information made available to us. Respect for autonomy of belief demands accordingly appropriate access to information, requires the possibility of citizens being in a position to make informed decisions or judgments—the aspect that I will focus on here.

Unfortunately, this is an aspect that too often comes under threat. In South Africa, it has come under threat in the form of the recently adopted *Protection of State Information Bill*¹³ which, if enacted, will limit access to relevant information about the functioning of government. But the threat is more widespread as recent events internationally exhibit. The threat exists even in states with an avowed respect for democratic principles. The problem is clearly much worse in states with less respect for the rights of their citizens.

Part of the problem arises from the tension that exists between the rights of citizens to have access to information and ostensible security considerations. Even in the more democratically aligned states, the balance between these threatens to shift in the wrong direction. It is critical therefore in this sort of context to understand what the (purported) respect for the autonomy of belief demands.

Given the account of autonomy of belief provided here, how can that autonomy be protected and optimized? The answer is that one important way of optimizing autonomy of belief is by ensuring that agents have greater access to information, to the evidence needed to form beliefs that are best warranted by the evidence. Our belief systems do form beliefs in the light of the information available to them. Increasing that information available optimizes the possibility of producing true beliefs. Allowing for access to differing points of view enables believers to critically assess the information available and so once again optimizes the possibility of producing true beliefs. By contrast, attempts to restrict access to information clearly infringe autonomy because they prevent people from forming beliefs suitably grounded in the truth, evidence, or reason. And attempts to restrict access to differing points of view impede the critical scrutiny that the search for true or warranted belief requires. Accordingly, a government that respected an individual's autonomy of belief would be one that maximized access to information, that provided access to the proper determinants of belief, and that permitted access to different points of view.

¹³ A revised version of the *Protection of State Information Bill* was adopted by the General Assembly in South Africa on the 12th November 2013 much to the dismay and despite the criticisms of those groups and organizations championing human rights including the right of access to information (as well as the right of freedom of speech).

By connecting autonomy to the objective determination of belief rather than to the will of the agent, the importance of access to evidence for belief is highlighted. Autonomy accordingly requires the availability of and access to relevant information. The autonomous agent will be a suitably informed agent. The Reverend John Smith was reputed to have said that he never read a book before reviewing it, since he did not wish to be prejudiced by its content.¹⁴ The account of autonomous belief presented here expresses the converse, more prosaic position, namely that autonomous beliefs need to be content sensitive, formed in the context, and on the basis of relevant information.

While highlighting the importance of information for autonomy, it doesn't follow that there cannot be any restrictions on the access to information. Perhaps there is a case for restricting information that would genuinely undermine the security of a country. But then a government that was both respectful of autonomy and protective of its citizens' security would ensure that any restrictions were appropriately minimized and subject to a suitable check. The balance needs to be in favor of the individual's right of access to information in so far as her autonomy is respected; the special case for restriction, the change from the default mode, would need to be suitably motivated and, I suggest, independently overseen. There needs to be an independent check that the reasons cited for restricting access on the basis of security considerations are indeed good reasons. And there should be an overriding mechanism, like a public interest defense.

Returning to home again, to those steps taken here in South Africa to restrict access to information on grounds of security as embodied in the *Protection of State Information Bill*, there are a number of questions that need to be asked in so far as autonomy of belief is respected: Are the restrictions in access to information limited to relevant security issues? Are the restrictions subject to independent supervision or oversight? Is there an overriding mechanism in operation like a public interest defense? Negative responses to these questions would entail disrespect for autonomy of belief.¹⁵ And it would entail disrespect for one of the critical conditions underlying democratic systems, namely having a suitably informed citizenry able to make informed decisions concerning matters that affect them and their society. The default mode ought to embody the right to have access

¹⁴ Or, so I remember hearing on a BBC program in the seventies. I have not been able to trace the source. But of course the point is being used for illustrative purposes, to illustrate what autonomy of belief is not.

¹⁵ Unfortunately, many (if not all) of those who do champion human rights would give negative answers to these questions on the *Protection of State Information Bill*. But, of course, the restriction on access to relevant information remains a threat in most states, including those that do avowedly champion human rights, as recent events exhibit.

to information. The shift from the default mode needs to be motivated by good reason. And that good reason needs to be independently overseen to constitute good reason. When the balance tilts in the other direction, it is autonomy that is at risk.

V

The account of autonomy of belief sketched permits degrees of autonomy. An agent can be more or less autonomous. There is also an important subjective and objective contrast here. An agent can be subjectively autonomous and so blameless for the beliefs she forms just in case she forms beliefs best warranted by the evidence available to her, where she has done what she can and should to ensure that her beliefs are true. Such an agent can nonetheless have false beliefs, can be misled by the evidence available. That something is missing here is shown by the fact that any morally problematic action her beliefs might give rise to would be excused. It would be recognized that she could not have known better given her context. She would not be treated as a fully responsible (and in this context, blameworthy) agent. She is misdirected by her compass, but she cannot be blamed for the compass she uses.

An agent is objectively autonomous and fully responsible for her actions just in case not only are her beliefs formed on the basis of the best evidence available to her, where this is so because she has behaved in an epistemically responsible way, but where the beliefs so formed are true. Such an agent would be held fully responsible for her actions. She would be creditworthy if performing a right action and fully blameworthy if performing a wrong action. In this case, there would be no excusing factors concerning the formation of belief. With respect to her beliefs, at least, she would be steering by an objective compass.

Though I take believing autonomously to be in this way a species of objectivist account, it must be stressed that respecting an individual's autonomy of belief involves respecting the exercise of their capacity to arrive at (true) belief in the right way, namely, typically, through the relevant evidential considerations. Autonomy is not respected where the state or elements of the state "determine" what is true and so "determine" what is to be believed. In that direction lie tyranny and disrespect for the autonomy of the individual.

This leads to a potential problem or challenge to the account. Being an objectivist account of autonomy of belief would it not be vulnerable to the sort of criticism made by Isaiah Berlin of earlier objectivist or externalist accounts. His complaint, in the following quote, is made in the context of an account which identifies the "real self" with reason, but it is clear how the point could easily be made in the context of the account I have defended:

The perils of using organic metaphors to justify the coercion of some men by others in order to raise them to a “higher” level of freedom have often been pointed out. But what gives such plausibility as it has to this kind of language is that we recognise it is possible, and at times justifiable, to coerce men in the name of some goal (let us say, justice or public health) which they would, *if they were more enlightened, themselves pursue, but do not because they are blind or ignorant or corrupt*. This renders it easy for me to conceive of myself as coercing others for their own sake, in their, not my, interest. I am then claiming that I know what they truly need better than they know it themselves. What, at most, this entails is that *they would not resist me if they were rational and as wise as I and understood their interests as I do* [. . .] [. . .] Once I take this view, I am in a position to ignore the actual wishes of men or societies, to bully, oppress, torture them in the name, and on behalf, of their “real” selves, in the secure knowledge that whatever is the goal of man (happiness, performance of duty, wisdom, a just society, self-fulfilment) must be identical with his freedom—the free choice of his “true,” albeit often submerged and inarticulate, self.¹⁶ (Italics my own)

It is hard not to share the horror of the picture sketched, so it makes it all the more important to exhibit that there is no entailment between the view I support and the picture sketched here; indeed that there is no obvious justificatory connection at all.

What is critical in defending the account against this challenge from Berlin is to recognize the following. Firstly, on the account I support, although autonomy is tied to truth, nothing follows about who possesses or knows the truth. Secondly, on the account, how one comes by what is true is critical to the account. Thirdly, on the account, the way to enhance autonomy is by maximizing access to the truth or evidence. I take these points in turn.

Consider the first point. That different groups can claim to have knowledge of what is objectively true does not vindicate the claim that they have the truth. Indeed, the account as specified is consistent with a fallibilist approach to knowledge, with the recognition that no matter how “certain” we are about the status of our beliefs, it is always possible that we are and will discover that we are wrong. An objectivist account specifies from the metaphysical or god’s eye perspective what is required for autonomy. The specific account, I support, suggests that autonomy is a truth- or evidence- or reason-tracking capacity. That account in itself implies no privileged epistemological relation to truth. The account in itself is silent as to what the truth is and indeed as to whether our beliefs do track the truth or evidence. The critical point is that what philosophers spell out from the god’s eye perspective in specifying the conditions for autonomy (for example) cannot be assumed from the participant perspective when we come to judge whether it is that we have knowledge or not.

Consider the second and perhaps more important point. The account, I have proposed, makes how one comes by the truth of crucial importance. If you

¹⁶ I. Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (London: Oxford U P, 1975).

possessed the truth, for me in turn to believe what is true in a way that satisfies the conditions for autonomy would involve my coming to believe what is true because of reason, because of evidence, that is, by rational persuasion, not by coercion or manipulation. “Shortcuts” of the kind suggested by Berlin are not licensed by the account. This means, in effect, that the appropriate method of acquisition of belief, namely via evidence or reason, itself provides a test of the belief and hence a block on the sort of “shortcuts” suggested.

Consider in turn the third and more positive point. The account suggests as seen that the way to increase autonomy of belief is by increasing access to truth, or more realistically access to evidence and the use of reason. The account suggests that what maximizes the likelihood of beliefs being true, of agents coming to acquire true beliefs, maximizes the agent’s autonomy. And what maximizes the agents coming to have true beliefs is precisely their access to truth, evidence, and reason. Autonomy of belief and the fostering of autonomy of belief go together with gaining greater access to evidence and reason, with greater access to information. Restrictions on such access would impede rather than enhance autonomy of belief.¹⁷

VI

To conclude: Beliefs are not states that are subject to the will or that are in the direct control of the will. Beliefs are—when the belief system functions optimally—truth- or evidence- or reason-sensitive states, states that are subject to, hence determined by what is true, or the evidence for the truth or the reasons we have for believing. At most, we can influence what we believe indirectly. If beliefs are not subject to the will, what can the autonomy of belief comprise? The answer is that their autonomy turns on how they are formed. Autonomous beliefs are beliefs formed in the right way, ideally in a rational reason-tracking way. The autonomous believer is the person whose beliefs are appropriately sensitive to truth, evidence, or reason, the person who believes what he does *because* of the truth of his beliefs, or the evidence or reasons that support them.

If this account is correct, then there can be internal as well as external cases of non-autonomous belief formation. External cases would include those where beliefs are, for example, manipulated by others. Internal cases would include those where beliefs are ill formed because of some sort of internal dysfunction in virtue

¹⁷ A similar argument can be made with respect to desires and their satisfaction. An account that connects the mode of formation of desires with autonomy in the way specified, and which links actions to desires via choices in the way indicated, clearly does not lend itself to the sorts of manipulations and interventions that troubled Berlin.

of which they are not appropriately sensitive. Though this account is not predicated on beliefs being within our direct control, it allows room for us to have some responsibility for our beliefs in that there are things that we can do at will that would indirectly and positively affect what beliefs we have, like, for example, seeking out evidence for (or against) our beliefs, or checking our reasoning. Indeed, the account not only permits us to say that an agent has or has not acted responsibly with respect to her beliefs, but should act responsibly with respect to them. The account permits us to hold agents responsible for their beliefs if they could have and should have known better in their context.

Finally, the account exhibits ways in which we can optimize autonomy. These include, most importantly here, increasing access to information. The greater an agent's access to the truth, evidence, or reason, the greater her autonomy. On the other side, attempts to restrict access to information clearly infringe autonomy because they prevent people from forming beliefs grounded in the truth, evidence, or reason.

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