

## Belief and Activity

**ABSTRACT:** There appears to be a tension in our conception of belief. On the one hand, belief seems to be at the mercy of evidence. On the other hand, our ordinary talk and blaming practices suggest we often choose our beliefs. I offer an account which resolves this tension. My account distinguishes outright belief from credence. On my account, outright belief is a state one is in by virtue of engaging in an activity. This activity is a way of organizing one's attention. By contrast, credence is not a state one is in by virtue of engaging in an activity. I show that, on this account, we have a kind of control over belief which vindicates ordinary talk of choosing to believe. But we do not have this kind of control over credence, so we can maintain that credence is at the mercy of evidence. As I develop my account, I argue that it meets several main constraints an account of belief should meet.

### §1 Introduction

There appears to be a tension in our conception of belief. On the one hand, belief seems to be at the mercy of evidence. As William Alston (1989) expresses the idea:

Can you, at this moment, start to believe that the United States is still a colony of Great Britain, just by deciding to do so?....It seems clear to me that I have no such power. (p. 122)

Of course, often our evidence is less conclusive. But even in those cases, it does not appear we can alter our degree of belief by choice (Ibid., p. 123-127).

On the other hand, we talk as if we often choose our beliefs. As Alex Worsnip (2015) has pointed out, the phrase 'I choose to believe' returns over 393,000 separate results on Google (p. 233). Worsnip suggests this talk is especially common in the cases of religious belief, belief in the testimony of a friend, belief in one's own abilities, and the termination of deliberation in belief instead of suspension (Ibid., p. 233-236). In my own case, I need only recall the last family reunion for confirmation that we do talk this way.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it does not appear that this talk is

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<sup>1</sup> An anonymous referee has suggested that ordinary folk who talk of choosing to believe are mistaking *acceptance* for belief. To accept  $p$  is to rely on  $p$  as true in a narrow, specified range of situations, as when a lawyer, aware that her client is guilty, reasons as if her client is not guilty in situations related to defending her client in court. It is generally agreed that one can choose to accept  $p$ . However, in many instances of the cases Worsnip mentions, it is unlikely ordinary folk are mistaking acceptance for belief. For, in many instances of these cases, it is not merely a narrow, specified range of situations in which the person relies on  $p$  as true. For example, most people who say they chose to believe that God

shorthand for one's choosing to do something distinct from believing which, in some manner or other, causes belief.<sup>2</sup> And notice that, in lockstep with ordinary talk of choosing to believe, is the intuition that a belief is the kind of thing for which one can be appropriately blamed. Consider, for example, a college student who believes that people with dark skin color are inferior.<sup>3</sup> Intuitively, this student is blameworthy for holding this racist belief. But if belief is not the kind of thing one can ever choose, it is puzzling how the student could be blameworthy for her belief.<sup>4</sup>

So, it seems belief is at the mercy of evidence, yet our ordinary talk and blaming practices suggest we often choose our beliefs. How should we resolve this tension? Is belief always at the mercy of evidence, or can we sometimes choose our beliefs?

The last question may represent a false dilemma. For belief comes in two varieties. Consider the following example. I am quite confident it will not rain today and, not giving the matter a second thought, I do not take an umbrella to school. At the same time, though even more confident that the lotto ticket will not win, I take the possibility that it will win seriously enough that I buy it. In saying that I am quite confident it will not rain and even more confident the lotto ticket will not win, we do not appear to have said all there is to say about what I *believe*. For there appears to be a sense in which I believe it will not rain today but do not believe the lotto ticket will not win, even though, in this case, I am *less* confident in what I believe than in what I do not believe.

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exists tend to rely on that proposition as true in general or normally, not just in a narrow, specified range of situations. Notice the contrast between their case and the case of the lawyer. I discuss acceptance in more detail in §2, and in footnote 19.

<sup>2</sup> Generally, those who talk of choosing to believe do not take themselves to refer to choosing to do something else, which causes belief. Notice that, in general, it would be infelicitous to ask the speaker what she chose to do, distinct from believing, which caused her belief. She may talk of choosing to believe for certain reasons, but have nothing to say if pressed to identify something distinct from believing which she chose to do to cause her belief. Contrast this with talk of choosing to have a tattoo. It is fine to ask the speaker what she chose to do, distinct from having the tattoo, which caused her to have the tattoo. She might speak of choosing to go to a tattoo parlor, or etc.

<sup>3</sup> For this example, see Nottelmann 2007, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> I take the idea that blameworthiness requires choice, in at least some sense, to be pretheoretical and common. Of course, some philosophers reject this idea. See, for example, Sher 2009 and Vargas 2005.

In view of such examples, it is common to draw a distinction between *credence* and *outright belief*. A credence is a degree of confidence, typically represented by a number within the unit interval  $[0, 1]$ . By contrast, an outright belief is a non-degreed, binary state. Outright belief involves relying on the relevant proposition as true, whether or not one is maximally confident in it.<sup>5</sup> Despite my extremely high credence, I do not have an outright belief that the lotto ticket will not win. For I do not rely on that proposition. By contrast, even with a lower (though still quite high) credence that it will not rain today, I do have an outright belief in that proposition, since I rely on it.

Given the distinction between credence and outright belief, we may not have to choose between the view that belief is always at the mercy of evidence and the view that we can sometimes choose our beliefs. For it might be that one of these views holds true of one of these kinds of belief, and the other of the other.

I shall offer an account which resolves the tension in precisely this way. Here is a sketch of it. Outright belief (hereafter, *belief*) in  $p$  is a state one is in by virtue of engaging in an *activity*.<sup>6</sup> This activity is a way of organizing one's attention. By contrast, credence is not a state one is in by virtue of engaging in an activity. Instead, it is a disposition to engage in particular activities, given one's preferences or desires. On this account, as we shall see, we have a kind of control over belief which vindicates ordinary talk of choosing to believe. But we do not have this

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<sup>5</sup> For discussion of this core feature of outright belief, see Weatherson 2005, Frankish 2009, Fantl and McGrath 2010, Wedgwood 2012, Ross and Schroeder 2014, and Dallmann 2014.

<sup>6</sup> The phrase 'by virtue of' is to be read in its non-causal sense. For example, we might say that a figure is a triangle by virtue of its having exactly three angles, or that a wall is red by virtue of its specific surface texture. In these examples, 'by virtue of' refers to a relation of metaphysical constitution or explanation, not causation. This relation is sometimes called *grounding*, as in Audi 2012. So, I shall often also say that belief is a state *grounded* in an activity. In both cases, I mean that one has this state if and only if one is engaged in the relevant activity, and that it is entirely by virtue of one's engagement in this activity that one has the state.

Another point of terminology: I shall use ' $p$ ' as a propositional variable in the main text. However, some of the authors I shall quote use it as a sentential variable.

kind of control over credence, so we can maintain that credence is at the mercy of evidence. In this way, my account resolves the tension.<sup>7</sup>

Now, according to *credal reductivism*, belief is reducible in some way to credence.<sup>8</sup> If my account is correct, though, credal reductivism is false. For, on my account, belief is grounded in activity, while credence is not. And, plausibly, a state grounded in activity could not itself be reducible to a state that is not grounded in activity.<sup>9</sup> One might take its conflict with credal reductivism to be a strike against my account. I join others, though, in thinking there are independent reasons to reject credal reductivism.<sup>10</sup> In any case, to the degree that my account has a particularly attractive explanation of the tension in our conception of belief, there is another reason to be suspicious of credal reductivism.

But it is reasonable to worry that my account could not be correct. In particular, it is reasonable to worry that belief is not the kind of thing which could be grounded in activity. For belief is an enduring state one has even when asleep. And one does not seem to be engaged in any activities when asleep. In light of this, it is not surprising that many identify belief with a disposition, with no attempt made to ground the disposition in activity.<sup>11</sup> Now, this worry about my account of belief applies equally to the parallel account of *intention* – viz., that intention is grounded in activity.<sup>12</sup> Advocates of this account of intention have developed a general strategy for dealing with this kind of worry. The basic idea is that some activities stretch across large

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<sup>7</sup> Frankish (2009) and Bondy (2015) also offer accounts on which outright belief is active in a sense in which credence is not. I compare my account to theirs in footnote 55.

<sup>8</sup> Credal reductivists include Weatherston 2005, Frankish 2009, Fantl and McGrath 2010, and Dallmann 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Though it appears Frankish (2004, p. 108-116) would disagree.

<sup>10</sup> As we shall see in §2, an account of belief must vindicate both the fact that belief in *p* involves reliance on *p* as true rather than merely as highly probable, as well as the fact that it is possible to believe *p* even though there are some things one would not be willing to risk on *p*. But then, as Ross and Schroeder (2014, p. 268-271) argue, credal reductivism faces a dilemma. Either belief in *p* reduces to a credal state which includes a credence of 1 in *p*, or it reduces to a credal state which includes a credence of less than 1 in *p*. If the former, we can explain why belief in *p* involves relying on *p* as true, and not merely as highly probable. But then we cannot explain why it is possible to believe *p* even though there are some things one would not be willing to risk on *p*. For one with a credence of 1 in *p* would be willing to risk anything on *p*. On the other hand, if belief reduces to a credal state which includes a credence of less than 1 in *p*, then we cannot explain why belief in *p* involves relying on *p* as true, and not merely as highly probable. For to have a credence in *p* of less than 1 is not necessarily to rely on *p* as true.

<sup>11</sup> Consider, for example, Ross and Schroeder 2014, Wedgwood 2012, and Schwitzgebel 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Advocates of this account of intention include Ferrero 2002, Thompson 2008, and Moran and Stone 2011.

intervals of time and are extremely easy to qualify as engaged in, and that the agent has any dispositions essential to an intention or belief by virtue of engaging in one of these activities. I shall offer one contribution to this basic idea, namely, a clarification of ‘activity’. But most of my efforts shall center on making room for the more specific idea that belief, in particular, could be grounded in an activity so understood.

The paper is structured as follows. §2 lays out constraints an account of belief ought to meet. In §3, I explain in more detail my strategy for resolving the tension in our conception of belief. In §4, I develop my account of belief, with an eye to meeting each of the constraints presented in §2. In §5, I explain how this account resolves the tension in our conception of belief. I conclude in §6 with brief discussion of further applications, including to pragmatic encroachment in epistemology.

## §2 Constraints on an Account of Belief

An account of belief should have the resources to explain certain facts about belief. In this section, I lay out five such constraints on an account of belief.<sup>13</sup>

The first constraint is that belief is an enduring mental state. As Matthew Boyle (2011) says,

We retain our beliefs even in dreamless sleep, when – on the usual understanding of “doing”, at least – we are not doing anything. (p. 6)

Beliefs are states which endure through dreamless sleep.

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<sup>13</sup> The literature contains a number of constraints which concern how belief relates to our normative concepts. Consider the following: a belief is correct just in case it is true, a belief is rational only if one has sufficient evidence for it, and it is irrational to believe inconsistent propositions. For discussion of these constraints, see Ross and Schroeder 2014, Wedgwood 2012, and Dallmann 2014. I shall focus on constraints which do not explicitly refer to the normative.

The second constraint concerns the core role of belief in our mental economy, and warrants more discussion. This is the fact that to believe  $p$  is, in some sense, to rely on  $p$  as *true*.

The idea is expressed in different ways. According to Robert Stalnaker (1984),

...to believe [ $p$ ] is to be disposed to act in ways that would tend to satisfy one's desires, whatever they are, in a world in which  $p$  (together with one's other beliefs) were true. (p. 15)

Stalnaker's definition is in terms of how one is disposed to act. But there is a growing tendency to understand belief in terms of how one is disposed to reason.<sup>14</sup> So, Brian Weatherson (2005) says that "to believe that  $p$  is to treat  $p$  as true for the purposes of practical reasoning" (p. 421). In similar fashion, Fantl and McGrath (2010) say that to believe  $p$  is to be "prepared to put  $p$  to work as a basis for what you do, believe, etc." (p. 143). Or, as Ralph Wedgwood (2012) puts it,

If you have an outright belief in  $p$ , you will simply take  $p$  for granted, treating  $p$  as a starting point for further reasoning... (p. 312)

I follow this trend and shall understand reliance on  $p$  as true in terms of reasoning.<sup>15, 16</sup>

Let us look at a kind of case often used to illustrate this core role of belief.<sup>17</sup> I am deliberating about whether to watch Netflix or instead Mad Max in the theatre. Watching Netflix would be fine. But so long as traffic would not delay me more than 30 minutes, I would prefer to go to the theatre and see Mad Max. I have a credence of .6 that traffic would not delay me more than 30 minutes. Incidentally, I also have a credence of .99 that my car would not break down on the way to the theatre.

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<sup>14</sup> In this connection, see Ross and Schroeder 2014, p. 263-268.

<sup>15</sup> Plausibly, relying on  $p$  as true in reasoning will make us tend to rely on  $p$  as true in how we act in general. If this is right, then something like Stalnaker's account could be explained by an account in terms of reasoning.

<sup>16</sup> Reasoning is commonly divided into practical and theoretical. Some hold that belief is to be understood only in terms of practical reasoning; see, e.g., Wedgwood (2012, p. 321). Others think belief can be understood in terms of both kinds of reasoning; see, e.g., Ross and Schroeder (2014, p. 264-268). Though I think my account of belief can be extended to theoretical reasoning, I shall be neutral on this question. So, I shall speak generally of reasoning, but discuss only practical examples.

<sup>17</sup> For this kind of case, see Ross and Schroeder 2014, p. 264-269.

There are two variations of the case. In both variations, I factor into my reasoning the possibility that the traffic would delay me more than 30 minutes. In Variation One, I do not factor into my reasoning the possibility that my car would break down on the way. That possibility may occur to me. But if it does, I ignore it. We can represent the possibilities I factor into my reasoning in Variation One with a matrix, whose rows represent courses of action, and whose columns represent states of nature:

<b>Variation One</b>	Traffic okay.	Traffic bad.
Mad Max	See Mad Max with only a little inconvenience.	See Mad Max with much inconvenience.
Netflix	See next movie in queue.	See next movie in queue.

In Variation Two, by contrast, I factor into my reasoning the possibility that my car would break down on the way. In this variation, my reasoning is more complicated:

<b>Variation Two</b>	Traffic okay; car okay.	Traffic okay; car breaks down.	Traffic bad; car okay.	Traffic bad; car breaks down.
Mad Max	See Mad Max with only a little inconvenience.	Terrible day.	See Mad Max with much inconvenience.	Even more terrible day.
Netflix	See next movie in queue.	See next movie in queue.	See next movie in queue.	See next movie in queue.

We can describe the difference between these two variations by saying that in Variation Two, I do not rely on the proposition that my car would not break down on the way. For I factor into my reasoning the possibility of the negation of that proposition. In Variation One, by contrast, I do rely on the proposition that my car would not break down on the way. In not factoring into my reasoning the possibility of its negation, I rely on the proposition as true in my reasoning, and not merely as highly probable.

For another kind of case sometimes used to illustrate reliance on a proposition as true, consider an example from John Hawthorne.<sup>18</sup> Suppose that I reason as follows:

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<sup>18</sup> Hawthorne 2004, p. 29.

- (1) My lottery ticket is a loser.
- (2) So, I get nothing if I keep it.
- (3) But I could get a penny if I sell it.
- (4) So, I should sell it.

If I reason in this way, I am relying on (1) as true in my reasoning, and not merely as highly probable.

The second constraint puts the third constraint into sharp relief. The second constraint appears to imply that if one believes  $p$ , one would be willing to risk anything on  $p$ . For, in relying on  $p$  as true, one ignores the possibility of  $p$ 's negation. But now suppose a demon appears and offers me \$1 if  $p$  is true against eternal torment if  $p$  is false. Ignoring the possibility of  $p$ 's negation, shouldn't I be willing to take that bet? What have I to lose?

However, it is possible to believe  $p$  even if there are some things one would not be willing to risk on  $p$ . For example, I believe Los Angeles is in California. But if a demon were to offer me the above kind of bet, it would be very natural for me to reply that though I decidedly believe Los Angeles is in California, I am not so incredibly confident of that proposition for me to feel comfortable taking such a bet (see Wedgwood 2012, p. 321). Another way to put the point is that it is possible to believe  $p$  even if one does not have a credence in  $p$  of 1 (Frankish 2009, p. 79). And if this is possible, we should expect it to be possible to believe  $p$  even if there are some things one would not be willing to risk on  $p$ .

Those who emphasize that to believe  $p$  is to rely on  $p$ 's truth are wont to offer a certain kind of clarification. To believe  $p$  is to rely on  $p$ 's truth, as Wedgwood (2012) phrases it, "for at least all *normal* practical purposes" (p. 321). Or, as Ross and Schroeder (2014) say, "believing that  $p$  *defeasibly* disposes the believer to treat  $p$  as true in her reasoning" (p. 267-268, italics mine). These clarifications are related: a case in which the defeasible disposition is defeated, and so does not operate on default, is precisely a case which is not normal. The idea here is that

belief in  $p$  involves reliance on  $p$  as true in *normal* cases, which allows that there may be some things one would not be willing to risk on  $p$ , even though one believes  $p$ . An account of belief should make good on this idea. So much for the third constraint.

The fourth constraint is that belief is distinct from *acceptance* as that notion has been popularized by L. Jonathan Cohen (1989) and Michael Bratman (1992). To accept  $p$  is to rely on  $p$  as true in a narrow, specified range of situations.<sup>19</sup> The case of a lawyer is often used to illustrate the notion. The lawyer may know full well that her client is guilty, in light of the evidence. Nevertheless, she may reason as if her client is not guilty in all situations relevant to defending her client in court. In this case, the lawyer accepts her client is not guilty. But she does not believe it. So, belief and acceptance are distinct.

I turn now to the fifth and final constraint. Consider an example. I look around, and I see no elephant in my room. Thus, I have a high credence that it is not the case that there is an elephant in my room. And because of this, it is *difficult*, to say the least, for me to believe there is an elephant in my room. This example illustrates a general connection between belief and credence: a high credence in  $p$ 's negation makes it difficult to believe  $p$ .<sup>20</sup> This is the fifth constraint.

Let me summarize the five constraints. First, belief is an enduring state. Second, belief in  $p$  involves relying on  $p$  as true. Third, it is possible to believe  $p$  even though there are some things one would not be willing to risk on  $p$ . Fourth, belief is distinct from acceptance. Fifth, a high credence in  $p$ 's negation makes it difficult to believe  $p$ .

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<sup>19</sup> This terminology is not universal, though. For example, for Frankish (2004, Chapter 5), to accept  $p$  is simply to rely on  $p$  as true in some sense or other. So, in Frankish's terminology, reliance on  $p$  as true in a narrow range of cases and belief in  $p$ , which is reliance on  $p$  as true in normal cases, are both subspecies of acceptance. I thank an anonymous referee for this point.

<sup>20</sup> One might even think, *a la* Bernard Williams (1973), that it is impossible to believe  $p$  if one has a high credence in  $p$ 's negation. But that is more controversial, unless a suitable sense of 'impossible' is specified.

### §3 The Strategy

Recall the tension in our conception of belief with which we began. It seems belief is at the mercy of evidence, yet our ordinary talk and blaming practices suggest we often choose our beliefs. My overall goal is to vindicate ordinary talk of choosing (outright) beliefs, while maintaining that credence is at the mercy of evidence. Now, to *vindicate* this talk requires not only explaining why it occurs, but also showing why, in the sense ordinary folk have in mind, we do often choose our beliefs. Moreover, if we do often choose our beliefs in the sense ordinary folk have in mind, it is not puzzling how one could be blameworthy for a given belief. In this section, I clarify what could explain why ordinary folk would say they chose to do something, and I explain why we should expect this talk to be generally correct. Then I explain how these observations inform my strategy for resolving the tension in our conception of belief.

When philosophers talk of choice, they tend to refer to the forming of an intention or plan. But we need not assume ordinary folk have something this precise in mind. To explain why ordinary folk would say they chose to do something, all we need is the observation that ‘choosing’ is an ordinary word for selecting between alternatives. As I hope to bring out, that something is a selection between alternatives can be part of *what it is like* for one to do it. In such cases, we should expect folk to report that they chose to do what they did.

Let us begin with some examples. Consider the contrast between a memory alighting as if from the blue, on the one hand, and raising your arm, on the other. You are not conscious of any particular cause of your remembering. But in raising your arm, there is at least some sense in which it feels as if you caused your arm to go up. We might also contrast your raising your arm with your sneezing. In sneezing, you are conscious of a particular cause of what you do –

namely, an irresistible urge to sneeze. But it does not feel as if you caused your sneezing in the respect in which it feels as if you caused your arm to go up.

In contrast with remembering and sneezing, raising your arm has what Carl Ginet (1990) calls “*actish* phenomenal quality” (p. 13). Ginet also calls it “the I-directly-make-it-happen phenomenal quality” (Ibid., p. 14). Terry Horgan (2011) offers the following description of actish phenomenal quality, in the case of raising your arm:<sup>21</sup>

You experience your arm, hand, and fingers as being moved by you yourself... You experience the bodily motion as generated by yourself. (p. 79)

Moreover,

In experiencing one’s behavior as emanating from oneself as its source, one experiences oneself as being able to refrain from so behaving... (Ibid., p. 80-81)

Although I shall make a few comments about the details shortly, Horgan’s description has a ring of truth to it. By contrast with your remembering, experiences with actish phenomenal quality represent oneself as the source of what one does, in some sense. And by contrast with your sneezing, these experiences represent multiple alternatives as available, in some sense.

Actish phenomenal quality involves experiencing oneself as the source of one among multiple available alternatives, in some sense. To have this experience is to have, in a manner, an experience of *selecting between alternatives*. As I had said, ‘choosing’ is an ordinary word for selecting between alternatives. Thus, we should expect ordinary folk to report events with actish phenomenal quality as *choices*.

With a sense of what could explain why ordinary folk would say they chose to do something, let us begin to think about whether they are generally correct, when they talk in this way.

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<sup>21</sup> What Ginet calls events with actish phenomenal quality, Horgan calls events with agentive phenomenology.

One might think not. For example, one might think actish phenomenal quality is *illusory*. Perhaps it is not the person herself who is the cause of what she does, in the relevant sense. Or perhaps, due to the truth of causal determinism, the multiple alternatives represented as available are not in fact available in the relevant sense. One might conclude that to report an event with actish phenomenal quality as a choice is to make a mistake, albeit a mistake in the grip of an illusion.<sup>22</sup>

But we should not be too worried that ordinary folk are in the grip of an illusion. It might help to make a few comments about the details of Horgan's description of actish phenomenal quality. First, the experience of *oneself* as source may be, more specifically, an experience of a special kind of mental state one has as the source.<sup>23</sup> I recommend neutrality on this front. Second, the experience of multiple alternatives available to one need not be understood as representing possibilities hostile to causal determinism. To explain, different kinds of possibility can be thought of as consistency with different kinds of facts.<sup>24</sup> Now, notice that physicists and ordinary folk individuate facts about people differently. Physicists are concerned with microphysical, neurological properties. But ordinary folk are concerned with people's mental states understood in terms of what it is like to live through them, what role these states tend to play in relation to other mental states, and so on. Correlative to this distinction, we can distinguish the *microphysical facts* from the *folk psychological facts*. And thus we can distinguish an alternative's being *microphysically possible* from its being *folk psychologically possible*. The first is its consistency with the microphysical facts up to the relevant time, but the

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<sup>22</sup> For arguments in this vein, see Caruso 2012, Ch. 4-7.

<sup>23</sup> According to J. David Velleman (1992), this special state is one's desire to act in accord with one's reasons. Others (e.g., Mele and Moser 1994) might think it is a "proximal intention". I do not speculate on what it might be.

<sup>24</sup> Logical possibility is consistency with the logical facts, metaphysical possibility is consistency with the metaphysical facts, and so on.

second is its consistency with the folk psychological facts up to that time.<sup>25</sup> A number of philosophers open to causal determinism have urged that multiple alternatives are often folk psychologically possible, even if not microphysically possible.<sup>26</sup> And here is the upshot: the experience of the availability of multiple alternatives need not be understood as representing their microphysical possibility. It can be understood as representing their folk psychological possibility. If so, what actish phenomenal quality represents is entirely friendly to causal determinism.

So, there appears to be little reason to suspect actish phenomenal quality is generally illusory. Henceforth, we shall assume that, generally, events with this quality are indeed selections between alternatives, and so qualify as choices.

Again, actish phenomenal quality involves the experience of multiple alternatives as available to one. More specifically, in some manner, one entertains one or more contents as available for one to realize (or refrain thereof)<sup>27</sup> – for example, the content *that I clench my hand now* or *to clench my hand now*.<sup>28</sup> Traditionally, the will is thought of as a capacity to realize such contents,<sup>29</sup> so it is natural to think of events with actish phenomenal quality as exercises of will. I prefer a simpler terminology, however. Stipulatively, I shall call events with actish phenomenal quality *acts*.

We have learned that we can vindicate ordinary talk of choosing our beliefs if beliefs relate in the right way to acts. Of course, a belief is neither itself an act nor grounded in an act.

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<sup>25</sup> More precisely, the folk psychological possibility of an alternative is its consistency with the folk psychological facts up to the relevant time *plus* all the facts causally disconnected from how the person exercises her capacities at that time. For this point, see Wedgwood 2013, p. 86-87.

<sup>26</sup> Among this number are Anthony Kenny 1976, Ch. 8; John Searle 1984; and Ralph Wedgwood 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Henceforth, I omit the parenthetical phrase. But it should always be taken to be implicit.

<sup>28</sup> The two characterizations of this content reflect two different theoretical pictures, one on which contents are propositions, as in Wedgwood 2001, and another on which they are not, as in Schroeder 2011. Also worth noting is that I am open to the view, for which Brian O'Shaughnessy (1980, Ch. 7) has argued, that contents are often entertained *nonconceptually*. O'Shaughnessy's argument is similar to the argument for nonconceptual perceptual content from the richness and fine-grained quality of perceptual experience (as, for example, in Bermudez and Cahen 2015, section 4.1).

<sup>29</sup> For discussion of several senses of 'will', see Kane 1985, p. 20-21.

For, to recall the first constraint from §2, beliefs are enduring states we have even when dreamlessly sleeping. And one dreamlessly sleeping performs no acts. However, it might yet be that belief is a state one is in by virtue of an *activity*, a temporally extended event which, perhaps, relates in the right way to acts. My strategy is to develop this possibility.

#### §4 Meeting the Constraints

In this section, I develop an account of belief with an eye to meeting each of the five constraints discussed in §2. I shall begin by defining activities in terms of acts. At the end of the section, I consider some objections.

##### §4.1 *Activities*

Above, I stipulated that events with actish phenomenal quality are acts. But this stipulation has a foothold in ordinary language. For example, raising one's arm is not only an example of an event with actish phenomenal quality, it is also an example of an event we would tend to call an 'act'. Similarly, though my definition of activities shall be stipulative, it has a foothold in natural language.

To begin, we shall think of an act as the smallest kind, or limit case, of an activity. The reason it is more natural to call raising one's arm an act, perhaps, is because 'activity' gets most of its mileage in reference to events of longer duration. For example, walking is an activity. Walking can last for hours. Now, one's walking for hours need not involve hours of continuous acts to move one's legs in particular ways. Instead, one might become so lost in a conversation that one's walking fades far into the conscious background and continues on quite automatically. If so, substantial temporal parts of one's actual walking are not acts.

In light of this, why do we consider walking an activity? Well, notice that, at any given time, one can pay attention to one's walking and then act to move one's legs in a particular way. This observation leads to a suggestion. Perhaps an activity is an event whose parts *can* be acts.

As we develop this suggestion, it will be important to keep in mind complex activities of significant duration. Some of these activities include periods during which the agent is asleep, if we take natural language at face value. For example, if I see a person sleeping on a cot halfway up Half Dome in Yosemite, it makes perfect sense to say, even though she is asleep, that she is *climbing to the top of the mountain*. Similarly, there is a clear sense in which, even when asleep, she is *traveling up the west coast*, *getting a PhD*, and so on. Intuitively, these temporally extended events are not simply *happening* to her, she is *doing* them. My definition of activities shall vindicate that these are indeed activities.<sup>30</sup>

Let  $e$  be a temporal part of the climb to the top of the mountain during which the climber is (dreamlessly)<sup>31</sup> sleeping. Is there a sense in which it is possible for  $e$  to be an act? Relative to the person at the time, this is not possible. For she is asleep at the time, and it is not possible to act when asleep. But in another sense, it is possible for  $e$  to be an act. Immediately prior to  $e$ , it is possible for her wake up, consider her options, and perform the act of remaining suspended on the cot instead of turning around in descent. In this sense, it is possible for  $e$  to be an act.

The distinction between event types and event tokens can clarify the two senses of possibility. Event  $e$  is a token of many different types of event.<sup>32</sup> Since an event token,  $e$  involves all the details: the person, the time, her situation, etc. Relative to all of these details, it is not

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<sup>30</sup> For discussion of temporally extended activities of this sort, see Ferrero 2002, p. 173-204.

<sup>31</sup> One might think one can act while dreaming. I shall henceforth talk simply of sleep, but I refer to dreamless sleep.

<sup>32</sup> Here I presuppose that event tokens are sufficiently coarse-grained to be tokens of multiple types. See Davidson (1963) for a view on which events are coarse-grained, and Kim (1966) for a view on which they are fine-grained.

possible for  $e$  to be an act. So, the sense in which it is possible for  $e$  to be an act must abstract away from these details.

Here we can put event types to use.  $e$  is a token of the event type *remaining suspended on the cot*. And this event type is itself a specific way for part of the event type *her climbing to the top* to occur in an interval of time. Moreover, it is possible for remaining suspended on the cot, the event type, to be an act. The point about its being possible for the climber to have woken up, and etc., illustrates that it is possible for a person to entertain and realize a content about that event type, where the resulting token has actish phenomenal quality. This is no trivial feature of an event type: it distinguishes arm raising, shifting one's attention, uttering a sentence, etc., on the one hand, from the beating of one's heart, food digestion, and perceptual experience, on the other. As I shall put it, the former event types are *candidates* for being acts, while the latter are not.

We began by thinking of  $e$  as a temporal part of the climb to the top during which the climber is sleeping. We have learned that the sense in which it is possible for  $e$  to be an act is that  $e$  is a token of an event type which is not only a specific way for part of her climb to the top to occur in an interval of time, but also is a candidate for being an act. As we might put it, the way in which she is climbing to the top, at that time, is the kind of thing which can be an act.

The above suggests a way of thinking about what makes an event type an activity type, namely that activity types are event types whose temporal parts are candidates for being acts. But nuance is required. Many activity types have temporal parts which are too large to be candidates for being acts. No significantly large temporal part of climbing to the top, traveling up the west coast, or getting a PhD is a candidate for being an act. This is because these event types have, built in, periods in which behavior continues on automatically, or in which one is at rest.

However, if we divide these event types into suitably bite-sized temporal parts, it is plausible that each of those parts is a candidate for being an act, taken individually. We saw how this could work in the case of the sleeping climber. A bite-sized, five second increment of her remaining suspended on the cot is an event type which is a candidate for being an act. Now, we need not worry about what makes a temporal part suitably bite-sized. There are arbitrarily many ways of dividing an event type into temporal parts. Surely some of them include only suitably bite-sized parts. Thus, we should say that there is *some* way of dividing an activity into temporal parts such that each of these parts is a candidate for being an act.

Gathering together what we have learned thus far, I offer the following:

*definition of activity types*      An event type E is an activity type if and only if there is some way of dividing E into temporal parts  $e^1 \dots e^n$  such that (i) each of  $e^1 \dots e^n$  is a specific way for part of E to occur in an interval of time and (ii) each of  $e^1 \dots e^n$  is a candidate for being an act.

My definition is stipulative, but it regiments a simple idea with a foothold in natural language.

This is the idea that an activity is an event whose parts can be acts.

As promised, this definition vindicates the idea that climbing to the top of the mountain, traveling up the west coast, and getting a PhD are activities. Getting a PhD, for example, involves significant periods of reading, class-attending, writing, teaching, etc., but also involves periods of rest and diversion in other pursuits. Its being feasible to complete the PhD requires staying within certain boundary lines (maintaining certain advisor/advisee relationships, staying in the area, etc.), and the periods of rest and diversion are specific ways for part of getting a PhD to occur exactly if they keep one within these lines.<sup>33, 34</sup> But even during rest and diversion, it is

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<sup>33</sup> Conceiving of what it is for part of an event type to occur in this way appears to have similarities with Ferrero's approach in his manuscript "Intending, Acting, and Doing". I thank Ferrero for sharing PowerPoint slides of some of the main ideas in that manuscript.

<sup>34</sup> So long as they keep one within these lines, everything the graduate student does is, at least under some description, part of her getting a PhD. An anonymous referee has suggested that this is implausible. A graduate student may get married, but getting married, so the objection goes, does not seem to be part of her getting a PhD.

always possible to consider the option of stepping outside of these lines and then act to remain within them. Thus, each suitably bite-sized temporal part of getting a PhD is a candidate for being an act.

And my definition is not too permissive. It categorizes clear non-activities as non-activities. Consider *digesting one's meals*, for example. Now, it is possible to divide this event type into temporal parts each of which is a candidate for being an act. For example, consider the event type *the parts of one's body moving in some way*, which is a candidate for being an act. Every five second token of digesting food is also a token of that event type. However, that event type is not a *specific* way for part of digesting one's meals to occur. The parts of one's body moving in some way is a *genus* of which digesting one's meals is a species. It is unsurprising for such genera to be candidates for being acts. But as I mean the phrase in clause (i), all specific ways for part of an event type to occur are at least as specific as that event type. So, for example, a specific way for part of digesting one's meals to occur is the event type *the dissolving of food particles by one's stomach acids*. No such event type is a candidate for being an act, in any time interval. So, my definition correctly categorizes digesting one's meals as a non-activity.

True, it is possible to divide breathing throughout one's life into temporal parts each of which is a specific way to breathe, and each of which is a candidate for being an act. Thus, my definition categorizes breathing throughout one's life as an activity. But I take this to be a virtue of my definition. Breathing appears to be active in a sense in which digesting one's meals is not. So, my definition appears to carve things at a real joint.

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In response, notice how natural it is to say that when one was getting married, one was also getting a PhD. And while the question of *how* one was getting a PhD at that time may initially seem misplaced, it has an answer. One got married in a manner which kept it feasible for one to finish the PhD. Not all ways of getting married meet this constraint. Consider, for example, getting married to someone who requires intensive, round-the-clock care.

This point about breathing illustrates the fact that, on my definition, an activity can have indefinitely wide temporal extent, including intervals during which one is asleep.<sup>35</sup> So, an account on which belief is grounded in an activity could explain why beliefs are enduring states which one has even when sleeping. And that is the first constraint from §2.

In fact, my definition makes room for the following kind of view. By virtue of engaging in the activity of climbing to the top, the sleeping climber is in a particular state which disposes her to continue upwards in certain characteristic ways. This state is the intention to climb to the top, which is an enduring mental state.<sup>36</sup> And the same story could hold in the case of belief. Perhaps, by virtue of engaging in a certain kind of activity, a sleeping person is in a state which disposes her to reason in characteristic ways. And perhaps this enduring state is belief.

#### §4.2 *Organizing One's Attention as if P is True*

Let us consider what kind of activity might ground belief. Recall the second constraint from §2, namely that belief in  $p$  involves relying on  $p$  as true in one's reasoning. This constraint concerns the core role of belief in our mental economy, and so appears to be a natural starting point from which to address this question.

Remember the Netflix or Mad Max case. In this case, I am deliberating about whether to watch Mad Max in theatres or instead stay home and watch Netflix. I have a credence of .6 that traffic would not delay me more than 30 minutes, and a credence of .99 that my car would not

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<sup>35</sup> It also illustrates how my definition makes engaging in multiple activities at one time extremely easy. At any given time, a normal person is engaged in a legion of activities.

<sup>36</sup> Philosophers who hold intention is grounded in activity include Ferrero 2002, Thompson 2008, and Moran and Stone 2011. Admittedly, whether mental states like intention and belief are best understood in terms of underlying activities warrants more discussion. For example, Bratman (1987, p. 4) raises the objection that it seems that one can have an intention to do something before doing anything about it. For a response to this kind of objection, see Ferrero (2002, p. 173-203).

As we shall see, my definition of activities makes the view that belief is grounded in an activity a view which can vindicate ordinary talk of choosing beliefs. For my definition bottoms out in actish phenomenal quality, which would explain why ordinary folk talk of choosing beliefs. Not every conception of activity can explain this linguistic data. For example, Boyle (2011, p. 19-23) develops a conception of activity on which holding a belief is an activity if one holds it because one regards it as rationally correct. But consider the belief that the United States is no longer a colony of Great Britain. Even if the ground by virtue of which I hold this belief is that I regard it as rationally correct, I would have no tendency to say I chose to hold it.

break down on the way to the theatre. In both variations of this case, I factor into my reasoning the possibility that traffic would delay me more than 30 minutes. In Variation One, I do not factor into my reasoning the possibility that my car would break down, ignoring it instead. But I do factor this possibility into my reasoning in Variation Two.

Notice the phrases it was natural to use to describe these variations. We say that I *factored a possibility into my reasoning* or instead that I *ignored it*. The opposite of ignoring something is paying attention to it in a particular way. This is what it is to factor something into one's reasoning. In light of this, consider the hypothesis that to rely on  $p$  as true is to organize one's attention in a certain way. In Variation One of the Netflix or Mad Max case, I attend to, as relevant to my reasoning, only possibilities consistent with my car's not breaking down. So, more specifically, perhaps to rely on  $p$  as true is *to engage in the activity of attending only to possibilities consistent with  $p$  as relevant to one's reasoning*. For brevity, I shall call this activity *organizing one's attention as if  $p$  is true*. To illustrate this terminology: in Variation One, I organize my attention as if the proposition that the car would not break down is true.

Let me offer some clarifications. A possibility can occur to one without one factoring it into one's reasoning. For example, in Variation One, the possibility that my car would break down may occur to me, but I do not factor it into my reasoning. Factoring a possibility into reasoning requires not only entertaining it, but also dealing with it as relevant to one's reasoning. This does not, of course, require believing that it is relevant.<sup>37</sup> This becomes apparent once we say more about what it is to attend to something as relevant to one's reasoning. To do this is to

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<sup>37</sup> No account of belief should maintain that, to deal with possibilities in these ways, one must *believe* they are relevant, or not relevant. As dealing with possibilities in these ways is part of belief, to countenance this kind of requirement would set off a regress of beliefs one would need to have, in order to have any particular belief. For example, to believe  $p$ , one would need to believe (something like) that the possibilities consistent with  $p$  are relevant and the possibilities not consistent with  $p$  are not relevant. But to believe *that*, one would have to believe that the possibilities consistent with *that the possibilities consistent with  $p$  are relevant and the possibilities not consistent with  $p$  are not relevant* are relevant and the possibilities not consistent with *that the possibilities consistent with  $p$  are relevant and the possibilities not consistent with  $p$  are not relevant* are not relevant. And so on *ad infinitum*. This regress appears vicious, very quickly involving extremely complex beliefs.

shift one's attention in order to structure what factors into one's reasoning, and what instead either fades away or becomes unheeded background noise. At an appropriate level of generality, attending in this way has a parallel in perceptual experience. If I see a Necker cube, I can shift my attention so that a particular corner pops out to me as in the foreground.<sup>38</sup> Similar comments hold with respect to Duck/Rabbit pictures. In all of these cases, we can shift our attention to organize the manner in which something is before our minds, which structures how we interact with it, whether in perceptual experience or in reasoning. But it is not as if, in shifting attention back and forth when looking at the Duck/Rabbit picture, one must alternate between believing it is a picture of a duck and believing it is a picture of a rabbit. Relevance in attention need not be believed relevance.<sup>39</sup>

Variation One of the Netflix or Mad Max case highlights a particular interval during which I organize my attention as if my car would not break down. But my organizing my attention in this way can extend indefinitely into the future, similarly to how my digesting meals, my breathing, and my securing financial solvency for my family can extend indefinitely into the future. Organizing my attention in this way is an event which can include some temporal parts during which I am asleep.

Moreover, organizing one's attention as if  $p$  is true is an activity. Recall, an event type is an activity type if and only if there is some way of dividing it into temporal parts such that each of those parts is a specific way for part of that event type to occur in an interval of time, and each of those parts is a candidate for being an act. Organizing one's attention as if  $p$  is true is an event

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<sup>38</sup> For discussion of Necker cubes, see Jack Lyons (2009, p. 43).

<sup>39</sup> On this count, I follow Arvidson 1996 and Watzl 2011. Each develops accounts of attention on which focal objects and contextual objects are presented as relevant to each other in specific ways. And each construes the presentation of relevance as experiential, not doxastic. Consider an example from Watzl (2011):

In many cases, when you are attending to the saxophone, the sound of the piano is experienced as relevant for or close to the experience of the melody played by the saxophone. (p. 156)

type which meets these criteria. For example, there is a sense in which it is possible for me, at any particular time, to consider the possibility that my car would break down, and to experience both paying attention to this possibility and ignoring it as available to me. In this case, whatever alternative I realize, the result is a shift of attention with actish phenomenal quality. And if I ignore the possibility as not relevant, this act is a temporal part of organizing my attention as if my car would not break down. Thus, in general, organizing one's attention as if  $p$  is true can be divided into temporal parts each of which is a candidate for being an act.

Per my discussion of activities in §4.1, the relevant sense in which it is possible for me to shift my attention as described concerns only the event type, not the event token with all its details. Thus, in the sense of possibility which is relative to particular individuals at particular times, it may not be possible for one to organize one's attention as if  $p$  is true at a given time. For example, one's evidence against  $p$  may be overwhelmingly strong. I shall discuss this issue in more detail in §4.5, where I explain why a high credence in  $p$ 's negation makes it difficult to organize one's attention as if  $p$  is true.

Attention is commonly divided into the voluntary and the involuntary.<sup>40</sup> The person controls voluntary attention, as when one focuses on one of multiple visual stimuli to which one could pay attention. Or, I may voluntarily shift my attention when looking at a Necker cube or a Duck/Rabbit picture. But factors other than the person control involuntary attention. For example, the nearby lightning strike may grab one's attention by force. This way of dividing attention fits nicely with the view that a way of organizing one's attention is an activity, in my sense. On the one hand, when a temporal part of the organization of one's attention is controlled by factors other than the person, the sense in which it is not possible for this temporal part to be

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<sup>40</sup> Voluntary attention is also called endogenous or top-down; involuntary attention is also called exogenous or bottom-up. For this distinction, see Ruff (2011, p. 5), Mole (2011, p. 67), Armstrong (2011, p. 87-88), and Wu (2011, p. 107).

an act is the sense relative to particular persons and times. On the other hand, when the person controls a temporal part of such organization, this part is, plausibly, an act. Moreover, so long as the parts are suitably bite-sized, there is no temporal part of such organization which we can rule out from the possibility of being an act simply on account of the event type it is. That is, these parts are candidates for being acts. And this is to say that ways of organizing one's attention are activities.

We began by pointing out that, in our mental economy, the core role of belief in  $p$  is reliance on  $p$  as true. Indeed, this is the second constraint from §2. I have suggested that to rely on  $p$  as true is to organize one's attention as if  $p$  is true. We have seen that organizing one's attention in this way is an activity. With all of this on the table, let me state the core proposal of this paper: belief in  $p$  is the state one is in by virtue of engaging in the activity of organizing one's attention as if  $p$  is true.

#### §4.3 *The Qualified Nature of Activities*

Recall the third constraint on an account of belief from §2, namely that it is possible to believe  $p$  even if there are some things one would not be willing to risk on  $p$ . For example, I believe Los Angeles is in California. But if a demon were to offer me \$1 if this proposition is true against eternal torment if it is false, it is consistent with my believing it that I turn this bet down. Now, if belief in  $p$  is grounded in the activity of organizing one's attention as if  $p$  is true, it is not immediately clear how this constraint can be met. For one might think that anyone engaged in this activity would ignore the possibility that Los Angeles is not in California, and so would be willing to take the demon's bet.

A solution to this problem derives from a general fact about activities to which we have yet to give attention. This is the fact that activities are *qualified* in nature.

Take the example of the person climbing to the top of the mountain. If asked what she is doing, she would say that she is climbing to the top. I shall take this kind of talk at face value. So, I assume she is indeed engaged in the activity of climbing to the top, even if she does not complete this activity. Now suppose that she comes to find, to her surprise, that the metal rings to which she had expected to secure her ropes are no longer there. Upon seeing the absence of the rings, she turns around in frustration.

Compare this case to one where she finds the metal rings as expected, but turns around because she starts to feel it would be nice to go river rafting before the day is over. It is more natural to say that she changes her mind about whether to complete the climb in this second case than it is to say this in the first. Moreover, it is more natural to say that she is prevented from completing the climb in the first case than it is to say this in the second. This means that in the first case, in which the metal rings are gone, there is a sense in which she does not change her mind about whether to complete her climb, but instead is prevented from completing it. This is the case even if she could, in principle, make the extremely dangerous attempt of climbing the rest of the way without ropes. This observation indicates that she is *not* engaged in what we might call the activity of climbing to the top *no matter what*. Were she engaged in this other activity, she would have to change her mind in order to turn back at the absence of the metal rings. Climbing to the top no matter what is an *unqualified* activity, and much more desperate than what we would normally call climbing to the top. As it is, she is engaged in a *qualified* activity. And hers is the normal case. Generally, activities are qualified.

As we might put it from a third-person perspective, our hero is climbing to the top *unless certain conditions obtain*. These are conditions to which she can respond, when face-to-face with them. As Luca Ferrero (2009, p. 722-725) might put it, these are conditions that make finishing

the climb either no longer feasible or no longer advisable. But not to be misunderstood, it is not as if the climber can complete what she is doing either by getting to the top, or by paying someone to remove the metal rings before she gets to the relevant point.<sup>41</sup> Instead, she pursues the whole activity “against the backdrop” of conditions on which climbing to the top is feasible and advisable: if this backdrop is pulled out from underneath her, she is prevented from completing the activity (Ibid., p. 705).

Climbing to the top is an activity with a built-in end point. But activities which extend indefinitely into the future are also typically qualified. Consider, for example, the activity of securing financial solvency. This activity involves promoting financial solvency in various situations. But it is not the activity of promoting solvency *no matter what*. There may be situations in which promoting solvency would be infeasible or inadvisable. Thus, securing financial solvency is qualified in the sense that it is the activity of promoting solvency in a certain *range*, but not *all*, of the situations in which it is possible to do so.

The same is true of organizing one’s attention as if *p* is true. This is not the activity of organizing one’s attention as if *p* is true *no matter what*. Similar to securing financial solvency, it is the activity of attending only to possibilities consistent with *p* in a certain range, but not all, of the cases in which it is possible to do so. Abnormal cases, including that of the demon’s bet, fall outside this range. Thus, to organize one’s attention as if *p* is true is to attend only to possibilities consistent with *p* in all *normal* cases. At least, that is how we might put it from a third-person perspective. This distinction between normal and abnormal cases reflects the qualified nature of the activity.

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<sup>41</sup> On the approach I am exploring in this paper, the activity in this example grounds one’s having an intention. In this connection, the content of the intention is not a material conditional. The intention is qualified in a way, but its content is *not* the following: either get to the top or make it infeasible or inadvisable to do so. On this point, see Ibid., p. 703-709.

So, the view that belief is grounded in organizing one's attention as if  $p$  is true can explain why it is possible to believe  $p$  even if there are some things one would not be willing to risk on  $p$ . In the abnormal case in which the demon offers an insane bet on  $p$ , one can attend to the possibility of  $p$ 's negation as relevant to one's reasoning and still count as organizing one's attention as if  $p$  is true. For this activity, like activities generally, is qualified.

#### §4.4 *The Range of Normal Cases*

Recall the fourth constraint on an account of belief from §2, namely that belief is distinct from acceptance as that notion as been popularized by L. Jonathan Cohen (1989) and Michael Bratman (1992). Consider, again, the example of the lawyer. She may know full well that her client is guilty. But she may reason as if her client is not guilty in all situations pertinent to defending her in court. In doing so, she accepts that her client is not guilty, but she does not believe it.

If my account of belief is to meet this constraint, it must be that the lawyer does not organize her attention as if her client is not guilty. What we said in §4.3 is of help on this front. True, the lawyer does attend only to possibilities consistent with her client's not being guilty in all cases pertinent to defending her in court. But she does not attend only to these possibilities in all normal cases. And to organize one's attention as if  $p$  is true is to attend to only to these possibilities in all normal cases.

The range of normal cases is more expansive than the cases within which one who accepts  $p$  attends only to possibilities consistent with  $p$ . To accept  $p$ , one must preconceive a precise boundary within which one will attend only to possibilities consistent with  $p$ . The case of the lawyer is a prime example of this fact.

By contrast, it is entirely possible to organize one's attention as if  $p$  is true without preconceiving any such boundary. This is a feature of activities in general, including qualified activities. For example, we can suppose that the climber does not preconceive of the precise conditions which would cause her to turn back, though she can recognize them when she sees them. This is why we were careful to say that it is a third-person perspective, not necessarily her own, from which we might describe her activity as *climbing to the top unless certain conditions obtain*. She sallies forth into the world with boldness, in engaging in her activity. This same boldness is possible in organizing one's attention as if  $p$  is true, though one can recognize abnormal cases like the demon's bet when one sees them. Due to this boldness, among the cases in which one will attend only to possibilities consistent with  $p$  are cases in which it is highly desirable to take truths, but *only* truths, as premises in one's reasoning.<sup>42</sup> In these cases, one who organizes her attention as if  $p$  is true will attend only to possibilities consistent with  $p$ , but the lawyer would not similarly attend only to possibilities consistent with her client's not being guilty. So, on my account, belief is distinct from acceptance.<sup>43</sup>

#### §4.5 *Why Belief in $P$ is Difficult with a High Credence in $P$ 's Negation*

Recall the fifth and final constraint from §2: that a high credence in  $p$ 's negation makes it difficult to believe  $p$ . For example, I have a high credence that it is not the case that there is an elephant in my room. And because of this, it is difficult for me to believe there is an elephant in my room.

Before explaining how my account meets this constraint, let me clarify a few assumptions I shall make about credence. Now, F.P. Ramsey (1926) defines credence in terms of what we are

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<sup>42</sup> Compare Frankish 2009, p. 87.

<sup>43</sup> Similarly, on my account, belief is distinct from supposition. When supposing  $p$  (as in reasoning by *reductio* to  $p$ 's negation), one preconceives a precise, narrow boundary within which to attend only to possibilities consistent with  $p$ . Normal cases outstrip this boundary.

disposed to do given our desires. On his view, granting we can reflect a person's desires in assignments of utility units to outcomes, to have a credence of  $n$  in  $p$  is identical with being disposed to risk up to  $n$  multiplied by  $m$  utility units on something with an outcome of  $m$  utility units if  $p$  is true and 0 utility units if  $p$  is false. Presumably, credences have something to do with utility-risking dispositions of this kind. However, I take Lina Eriksson and Alan Hajek (2007, especially p. 207-208) to have argued with plausibility that credences help *explain* utility-risking dispositions, without being identical to them. They (Ibid.) have also argued that credences help explain other dispositions, including dispositions to reason in certain ways.

My assumptions about credence dovetail nicely with Eriksson and Hajek's picture. My first assumption is that a credence disposes one to engage in specific activities, given one's preferences. These activities include betting in particular ways. But they also include attending to  $p$ -possibilities<sup>44</sup> as relevant to one's reasoning if one has a positive credence in  $p$ . My second assumption is that these dispositions do not necessitate engagement in the activity, even if one is in the relevant circumstance. This second assumption is important in light of my account of belief. If a positive credence in  $p$ 's negation *necessitated* attending to not- $p$ -possibilities as relevant, it would not be possible to organize one's attention as if  $p$  is true if one has a positive credence in  $p$ 's negation, however small. But it is entirely possible to believe  $p$  despite having a positive credence in  $p$ 's negation.

My third and final assumption is that credence is *not* a state one is in by virtue of engaging in an activity. This assumption is a clear consequence of some accounts of credence. For example, L. Jonathan Cohen (1989) holds that a credence is a disposition to "feel it true that  $p$ " to a particular degree (p. 368). Dispositions to feel a certain way are not states grounded in

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<sup>44</sup> A  $p$ -possibility is a possibility in which  $p$  is true, and a not- $p$ -possibility is a possibility in which  $p$ 's negation is true.

activities. A disposition to move one's legs in a particular way can be grounded in an activity because moving one's legs in this way is a candidate for being an act. But a disposition to feel a certain way cannot be grounded in an activity, because feeling a certain way is not a candidate for being an act. Now, I shall not assume credence is to be understood in terms of feelings. But Cohen's account is a clear example of one which fits within the parameters of my third assumption.

One might wonder why we should assume credence is a state which is not grounded in activity.<sup>45</sup> In response, let me begin with a dialectical point. I have been developing an account of belief with an eye to meeting the main constraints such an account should meet. And it has been no accident thus far that, on my account, belief is a state grounded in an activity. For one, the examples that illustrate what it is to rely on  $p$  as true in one's reasoning appear to vindicate the idea that to rely on  $p$  in this way is to organize one's attention in a particular way. And, as we saw, organizing one's attention in a particular way is an activity, not something we should expect to be at the mercy of evidence. With this in mind, remember how I began the paper by highlighting our strong intuition that at least *some* general kind of doxastic state is at the mercy of evidence. Now, if there is more than one general kind of doxastic state, belief and credence appear to be the only options. So, insofar as my account of belief is plausible thus far, we have some reason to suspect that, of the two general kinds of doxastic states, it is credence which is at the mercy of evidence.

This dialectical point aside, here is a speculation about why credence is not grounded in activity. Perhaps one of the essential functional roles of credence in  $p$  is to mirror one's evidence, by representing the degree to which  $p$  is likely. And it might be that to mirror one's evidence is

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<sup>45</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

never to select between alternatives. To see why, consider two cases. In the first case, one is presented with reasons to go to a wedding, and also with reasons to not go. One can either go for the reasons to go, or not go for the reasons to not go. In this case, one faces alternatives from which to select. In the second case, one is presented with evidence for  $p$  and evidence against  $p$ . Now in this case, insofar as mirroring one's evidence is concerned, it is *not* the case that responding solely to the evidence for  $p$  is one alternative while responding solely to the evidence against  $p$  is another. For to mirror one's evidence is to reflect *both* sets of evidence in a single, degreed manner. Given this, it is unclear whether, insofar as mirroring one's evidence is concerned, one is ever presented with alternatives from which to select. To use an image, it might be that mirroring one's evidence is always akin to registering the shade of color produced by the mixture of other colors, but never akin to selecting between colors. But if all of this is on track, then no event that grounds credence in  $p$  could have parts that are candidates for being acts. In any case, that is my speculation about what might explain my third assumption about credence, namely that it is not grounded in activity.<sup>46</sup>

On my assumptions, a positive credence in  $p$ 's negation disposes one to attend to not- $p$ -possibilities as relevant to one's reasoning. This disposition does not necessitate. However, plausibly, the higher one's credence in  $p$ 's negation, the *stronger* a disposition it is to attend to not- $p$ -possibilities as relevant. Moreover, it is plausible that at some point, the disposition is so strong that in the sense of possibility relative to particular persons and times, it is not possible for one to ignore these possibilities in one's reasoning.

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<sup>46</sup> Moreover, as Ross and Schroeder (2014, p. 259-260) have pointed out, there is a growing consensus that, if practical reasons affect the rationality of our doxastic states, they affect rational belief but not rational credence. As I explain in §6, perhaps this is precisely what we should expect if belief is grounded in activity but credence is not.

To see why this should be plausible, let us compare credence to other states which are not grounded in activities, yet which dispose us to engage in particular activities. Feelings qualify as such states. For example, we all have strong feelings of self-preservation, which manifest vigorously when we are extremely hungry or near the edge of a cliff. These feelings make a long-term fast difficult, but eating daily easy. More to the point, they make it so that, in the sense of possibility relative to particular persons and times, it is not possible for me to fling myself off a cliff. Nor is it possible, in this sense, for me to *avoid* engaging in some activities, such as the activity of keeping myself away from fast moving traffic.

We can generalize. States not grounded in activities, if sufficiently strong, can make it impossible to engage in certain activities, in the sense of possibility relative to particular persons and times.<sup>47</sup> When not thinking clearly about such states, we may think that, if given sufficient incentive, we could just do anything we can coherently imagine. But that is fantasy: such states make certain activities genuinely available to us and effectively close off others.<sup>48</sup>

On my account of belief, to believe  $p$  is to organize one's attention as if  $p$  is true. And to do that requires ignoring not- $p$ -possibilities in one's reasoning. But as we have seen, it is plausible that a high credence in  $p$ 's negation disposes one so strongly as to close off the possibility of ignoring not- $p$ -possibilities, in the sense of possibility relative to particular persons and times. And this is why, on my account, a high credence in  $p$ 's negation makes it difficult to believe  $p$ . So, my account meets the fifth and final constraint from §2.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> As in §4.1, this sense of possibility is to be distinguished from that which concerns simply the *event type*. In this other sense of possibility, the event type *flinging myself off a cliff* can be an act; that is, it is a candidate for being an act.

<sup>48</sup> Compare Mourad 2008, p. 61.

<sup>49</sup> I believe this explanation of the fifth constraint has attractions in comparison to others on the market. Frankish (2004, p. 150) and Wedgwood (2012, p. 324-328) hold that it is difficult to believe  $p$  if one has a high credence in  $p$ 's negation because it is *irrational* to do so. But this gives us an explanation only if it is always difficult to do what is irrational. And this is not clear. Sometimes doing what is rational is more difficult than doing what is irrational. And even if irrationality always presents a kind of difficulty, I appear quite able to irrationally eat too much ice cream in a sense in which I am not able to, say, believe there is an elephant in my living room.

Another possible explanation appeals to credal reductivism. Credal reductivists could maintain that no belief in  $p$  can reduce to an overall credal state which includes a high credence in  $p$ 's negation. Then they could explain why it is difficult to believe  $p$  if one has a high

#### §4.6 *Objections and Replies*

In this section, I reply to three objections to my account.

*First objection.* It is possible to believe  $p$  without ever having entertained  $p$ . Consider, for example, the proposition that one cannot fly unaided. One might believe this proposition, but never consider the matter. But then whatever believing this proposition amounts to, it does not seem to be grounded in an activity of organizing one's attention in a particular way.<sup>50</sup>

In response, my definition of activities allows for the possibility that one engages in the activity of organizing one's attention as if  $p$  is true even if one has never entertained  $p$ . On my definition, an event is an activity just in case there is some way of dividing it into temporal parts such that each of these parts is a specific way for part of the event to occur, and each is a candidate for being an act. There are many specific ways for part of the event of organizing one's attention as if  $p$  is true to occur in which one does not entertain  $p$ . One could be reasoning about something unrelated to  $p$ , one could be asleep, and so on. Moreover, one who has never entertained  $p$  may nevertheless have the ability to, at any given time, entertain  $p$ - and not- $p$ -possibilities and act to attend to them in the relevant way. Thus, an event of organizing one's attention as if  $p$  is true could meet the conditions my definition lays down, even if one has never entertained  $p$ .

One might object that if one has never entertained  $p$ , one would not have the ability to, at any given time, entertain  $p$ - and not- $p$ -possibilities. For our purposes, this may well be.<sup>51</sup> But if

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credence in  $p$ 's negation by saying that this combination of states is impossible. But, as in footnote 10, there is reason to be suspicious of credal reductivism.

<sup>50</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for raising this objection.

<sup>51</sup> By my lights, it is not obvious that it is possible to believe  $p$  without ever having entertained  $p$ . I hold, with Robert Audi (1994), that we do well to distinguish believing  $p$  from the disposition to believe  $p$ . And it might be that we are prone to mistake cases in which one has a disposition to believe  $p$  without ever having entertained  $p$  for cases in which one believes  $p$  without ever having entertained  $p$ . In any case, my account leaves as an open question whether one can believe  $p$  without ever having entertained  $p$ . The answer to the question depends on what it takes to have the ability to, at any given time, entertain  $p$ -possibilities, not- $p$ -possibilities, and act to attend only to  $p$ -possibilities as relevant to one's reasoning. Plausibly, this ability requires possession of each concept needed for entertaining  $p$ . This, in itself, is a nice result, for it allows my account to explain why no proposition incomprehensible to one is a proposition one believes. In addition, the relevant ability may be more sophisticated than the raw capacities which allow us to entertain  $p$  for the first time, and may require  $p$ 's having been entertained in the past by

one does not have this ability, I submit that she also fails to have belief in  $p$ . Thus, to place having entertained  $p$  as a necessary condition on this ability is to jeopardize the first objection's premise that it is possible to believe  $p$  without having entertained  $p$ .

Perhaps most importantly, one might worry that my definition categorizes too many events as activities, in allowing for organizing one's attention as if  $p$  is true to be an activity even in cases in which one has never entertained  $p$ .<sup>52</sup> Now, while an activity is a doing in some sense, it need not be a doing in every sense. For example, there appears to be a sense in which someone who is asleep is doing nothing at all. But as mentioned in §4.1, when focusing on complex events of significant duration and taking language at face value, there is a sense in which, even when asleep, one might be climbing to the top of the mountain, traveling up the west coast, and getting a PhD. Moreover, there is a sense in which these events are not simply happening to one. One is doing them. With this in mind, rather than showing my definition to be too permissive, we can learn a different lesson from the first objection. This is the lesson that, in the sense of 'doing' at issue, one can be doing something without *ever* being aware of it. I recently saw a physical therapist who informed me that I walk with my right foot turned further outward than my left foot. I might never have become aware of this. But even so, my walking in this way was something I was doing, not something happening to me. My definition categorizes this as an activity, and, as with organizing one's attention as if  $p$  is true where one has never entertained  $p$ , it is right to do so.

*Second Objection.* Suppose I am reasoning about what to do today. I think to myself that cycling in the park would be easy and inexpensive. But my enthusiasm wanes after I remember a

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means of these other capacities. For comparison, when we say that one has the ability to selectively isolate one's ear muscle, so as to wiggle it, the ability we refer to seems to be more sophisticated than the raw capacities which allowed that person to isolate and wiggle her ear for the very first time.

<sup>52</sup>

I thank an anonymous referee for this point.

handful of things I believe. I first remember that my bike has a flat. I wonder if I could use my kit for fixing tires, but then I remember that my friend borrowed it. I consider calling her, but then I remember that she is unavailable, being out of town. So, the possibility that cycling in the park would be easy and inexpensive is inconsistent with things I believe. Nevertheless, I paid attention to this possibility in my reasoning. So, contrary to my account, it is not the case that, to believe something, I must attend only to possibilities consistent with it as relevant to my reasoning.<sup>53</sup>

In response, the possibility that cycling in the park would be easy and inexpensive is consistent with each of the handful of propositions, taken individually. For example, it is consistent with my bike having a flat, as I am handy with my kit for fixing tires. What the possibility at issue is inconsistent with is this conjunction: my bike has a flat and my friend borrowed my kit for fixing tires and my friend is unavailable. Now, one can believe each of a set of propositions without believing their conjunction. So, the example makes trouble for my account only if, when I am paying attention to the possibility that cycling in the park would be easy and inexpensive, I already believe the relevant conjunction. But, plausibly, the example is precisely a case in which I do not believe this conjunction, and instead merely its conjuncts. It looks to be a case in which, put colloquially, I am putting things together. That is, it looks to be a case in which I reason from a set of things I believe individually to a conjunction of those things. And it is precisely when I arrive at belief in that conjunction that I cease to pay attention, in my reasoning, to the possibility that cycling in the park would be easy and inexpensive. Rather than being contrary to my account, this is precisely what my account predicts.

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<sup>53</sup>

I thank an anonymous referee for raising this objection.

*Third objection.* Suppose a healthy friend of mine has a practice of paying attention, each day, to the possibility that she will have a heart attack that day. She does this to motivate herself to continue going to the gym. Now even so, it might well be that, each day, she believes she will not have a heart attack that day. And that is contrary to my account.<sup>54</sup>

In response, while my friend does indeed attend, each day, to the possibility that she will have a heart attack that day, she does not attend to that possibility *as relevant to her reasoning*. Instead, she attends to that possibility to motivate herself, that is, to instill or invigorate certain feelings. Similarly, I may imagine a possibility in which I do not have shelter, to increase my gratitude for my apartment. In neither case is the possibility attended to as relevant to one's reasoning. Otherwise, I would start considering what could ensure I have shelter by tonight, and my friend would start considering whether to stop her normal workout routine so as to make the most of what could be her last hours. Attending to a possibility as relevant to one's reasoning and attending to a possibility in order to affect one's feelings both involve attending to that possibility, but in different ways.

In any case, not only does my account meet each constraint from §2, it also stands up to objections.

## §5 Tension Resolved

Now we can resolve the tension in our conception of belief with which we began. Remember: it seems belief is at the mercy of evidence, yet our ordinary talk and blaming practices suggest we often choose our beliefs. My overall goal has been to vindicate ordinary talk of choosing (outright) beliefs, while maintaining that credence is at the mercy of evidence. In §3, I pointed out that we could vindicate ordinary talk if belief is grounded in temporally extended

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<sup>54</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for raising this objection.

events which relate in the right way to acts. For acts involve the experience of oneself as the source of one among multiple alternatives, and ‘choosing’ is an ordinary word for selecting between alternatives.

In §4, I developed an account on which belief in  $p$  is grounded in organizing one’s attention as if  $p$  is true. We have seen that this account meets each of the constraints put forth in §2. Organizing one’s attention as if  $p$  is true grounds an enduring state of reliance on  $p$  as true, which one can have even if there are some things one would not risk on  $p$ , which is distinct from acceptance, and which is difficult to have if one has a high credence in  $p$ ’s negation. A state like this looks like belief.

Moreover, organizing one’s attention as if  $p$  is true is an *activity*. That is, to simplify, its parts are candidates for being acts. Indeed, this is a general feature of ways of organizing one’s attention. So, at any given time, it is possible to experience the availability of the alternative of attending only to possibilities consistent with  $p$ , the alternative of doing otherwise, and to realize one of these alternatives. On my account, realizing the first alternative grounds one’s belief in  $p$  at that time, and realizing the second grounds one’s suspension with respect to  $p$  at that time. So, we should expect ordinary folk who realize the first alternative to be inclined to say that they chose to believe  $p$  at that time. For at that time, an act constituted their engagement in the activity which grounds belief in  $p$ .

Recall Worsnip’s (2015, p. 233-236) suggestion that talk of choosing to believe is especially common in the cases of religious belief, belief in the testimony of a friend, belief in one’s own abilities, and the termination of deliberation in belief instead of suspension. My account can explain why this talk should be common in such cases. It is typical of such cases that neither one’s credence in  $p$  nor one’s credence in  $p$ ’s negation is overwhelmingly high. So, in

these cases, one's credal dispositions are typically not overwhelmingly strong. In light of this, we should expect many instances in which both organizing one's attention as if  $p$  is true and doing otherwise are available to particular individuals at particular times. And, I might add, this is how these cases often seem like from the inside.

So, by grounding belief in activity, my account vindicates ordinary talk of choosing to believe. And as a bonus, my account has promise to explain our blaming practices. Recall the college student who, intuitively, is blameworthy for holding a racist belief. If my account is correct, it might well be that this student could have chosen to refrain from believing that people with dark skin color are inferior. If so, there is no mystery why she is blameworthy.

And we can also explain why it seems that belief is at the mercy of evidence. For 'belief' often refers to credence. And credence is at the mercy of evidence, in the relevant sense. There is some manner in which our evidence affects which credence in  $p$  we have. And however our evidence does this, it is not by motivating an activity. This is because, on my account, credence is not grounded in an activity. Thus, however evidence impacts credence, it bypasses our activities in doing so. In this sense, credence is at the mercy of evidence.

In this way, the tension in our conception of belief is resolved. I take this to be a non-trivial attraction of an account of belief and credence.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> There are other accounts on which outright doxastic states are active in a sense in which credence is not. For example, Frankish (2009) and Bondy (2015) each hold that credence is passive while what they call *acceptance* is active. One problem is to show that acceptance, so understood, is distinct from acceptance as understood by Cohen (1989) and Bratman (1992). Frankish's account does better on this front than Bondy's. However, Frankish's view is a version of credal reductivism and so faces objections which my account does not, as in footnote 10.

But the following is perhaps a more important contrast from Frankish and Brody's accounts. In defining acts in terms of actish phenomenal quality and activities in terms of acts, I have made precise a sense of 'active'. And in explaining how belief could be grounded in an activity, namely a way of organizing one's attention, I have explained *how it could be* that belief is active in this sense. Frankish and Brody speak of outright doxastic states as voluntary, chosen, intentional, or etc., but do not offer an explanation of this kind.

## §6 Conclusion

I conclude by gesturing at other applications of my account. As mentioned in §1, my account implies that credal reductivism is false, on the plausible principle that a state grounded in activity could not itself be reducible to a state that is not grounded in activity. In addition, my account relates to the debate about *doxastic voluntarism*, the view that one can, in some sense, believe at will.<sup>56</sup> If my account is correct, a version of voluntarism is true about outright belief, but no version is true of credence. In addition, this version of voluntarism about outright belief is moderate, as one cannot choose to believe *p* if one has a high credence in *p*'s negation. So, my account vindicates a restricted, moderate version of voluntarism which is similar to what Keith Frankish (2007, p. 527) calls “weak voluntarism”.

My account also relates to what has become known as *pragmatic encroachment* in epistemology.<sup>57</sup> Those who endorse pragmatic encroachment hold that practical reasons, in addition to evidential reasons, can affect whether one has knowledge or rational belief. As Ross and Schroeder (2014, p. 259-260) have pointed out, there is growing consensus that, if there is pragmatic encroachment, it affects rational belief but not rational credence. My account may help explain this asymmetry. For on my account, belief is a state one is in by virtue of engaging in an activity, but credence is not. And it might be that a reason qualifies as practical because it is a reason to engage in an activity. That is, it might be that practical reasons and activities are made for each other, as it were. If this is right, my account could help explain why pragmatic encroachment appears to have the boundary lines that it does.

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<sup>56</sup> For discussions of doxastic voluntarism, see, for example, O’Shaughnessy 1980, Alston 1989, and Frankish 2007.

<sup>57</sup> For discussion of pragmatic encroachment, see, for example, Fantl and McGrath 2002, Ross and Schroeder 2014, and Schroeder 2012.

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