

ACTION AND DOXASTIC CONTROL: THE ASYMMETRY THESIS REVISITED

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ABSTRACT

James Montmarquet has argued against the Asymmetry Thesis (AT): the doctrine that belief and action are asymmetrical with respect to direct voluntary control. Montmarquet's case against AT is representative of a prominent line of reasoning found in the recent literature on doxastic voluntarism. In this essay I defend AT. I grant that Montmarquet was successful in his reply to reasons offered in defense of AT in his essay. However, the reasons considered by Montmarquet are not exhaustive. In this paper, I offer two more considerations not taken up by Montmarquet and not typically taken up in the more recent literature that are each sufficient to establish the truth of AT.

Keywords: doxastic voluntarism, action, belief, agency, epistemology

1. Introduction

James Montmarquet made the following controversial claim in 1986:

[R]easons for action play a role in the determination of action which is analogous to the role played by reasons for thinking-true in the determination of beliefs; and ... consequently, if *the controlling influence of reasons* on actions is compatible (as I assume it is) with the voluntariness of action, the same is true with respect to the influence of reasons for thinking-true on beliefs. (Montmarquet 1986, p. 49, emphasis added)

In offering these remarks, Montmarquet was challenging the "Asymmetry Thesis" (henceforth, AT), the doctrine that "Belief, unlike action, is not—not directly—under our voluntary control." So "belief and action are 'asymmetrical' with respect to direct voluntary control" (Montmarquet 1986, p. 49). Montmarquet's work was never greeted by any direct replies. With the continued and recent growing interest in doxastic voluntarism and the ethics of belief, offering an explicit defense of AT seems timely and important. In this paper I will defend AT.

2. Montmarquet's case against AT

Focusing on Bernard Williams's argument against the conceptual possibility of exercising direct voluntary control over coming to believe a proposition independently of any alethic considerations, Montmarquet asks the following question. "Could we construct an analogous argument purporting to show, by way of a *reductio*, that action, too, must be regarded as independent of the will?" (Montmarquet 1986, p. 50). Central to his strategy is the claim that belief and action are similar since one can neither believe nor act absent having a reason for doing so.¹ Montmarquet aims at showing that reasons have the same type of causal role in the etiology and control of action and belief. In his essay, Montmarquet responds to six considerations offered in favor of AT as the means of supporting his rejection of AT. I will not rehearse the considerations he offers here.² I believe Montmarquet's argument against AT can be summarized and represented as follows.

1. Belief and action are the same with respect to the controlling function of reason in their etiology.
2. If (1), then AT is false.
3. So AT is false

If the arguments for AT that Montmarquet considered in his original essay exhausted the range of responses the defender of AT could offer, then I grant that the prospects for defending AT are grim. But even if one grants that Montmarquet successfully addressed the objections expressed in defense of AT in his original paper, it is not obvious that the defender of AT must surrender and concede that belief and action are symmetrical with respect to control. I will assume that Montmarquet's attempt at rebutting

¹ Such a strategy in the service of defending direct doxastic voluntarism has since been taken up by Mark Heller (2000), Sharon Ryan (2003), and Matthias Steup (2000). For a reply to Heller, see Andrei Buckareff (2006c). For a reply to Ryan, see Buckareff (2006a). For replies to Steup, see Buckareff (2006b) and Richard Feldman (2001). It is worth noting that, to my knowledge, none of the mentioned defenders of direct doxastic voluntarism mention Montmarquet's work. Rather, they offer similar arguments that rely on claims to the effect that the role and controlling function of epistemic reasons is the same in the etiology of coming to believe as practical reasons in the etiology of action.

² Montmarquet notes at the close of his paper that Williams's own argument in defense of AT may not rest on the same sorts of considerations that Montmarquet focuses on in his case against AT. Specifically, Williams does not say anything about AT standing or falling "according to certain analogies or disanalogies governing *reasons*—for belief and for action" (Montmarquet 1986, p. 53). Williams is concerned with whether an agent can simply decide to believe *p* and consciously come to believe *p* just because she wants to believe *p* without any concern for the alethic considerations that favor or count against *p* (See Williams 1973, p. 148). That is, Williams is most concerned with whether or not coming to believe can be subject to control *in the exact same way* as a basic action. So Williams is interested in whether or not an agent can simply come to believe that *p* just because she wants to and decides to believe that *p*. Montmarquet, on the other hand, focuses on controlling beliefs via epistemic reasons. Given his preoccupation with the role of epistemic reasons in the etiology of coming to believe, Montmarquet fails to show that Williams's argument is not sound. Montmarquet offers some remarks that I am afraid are not very helpful as stated and perhaps would have strengthened his case if fleshed out.

the objections of his would-be interlocutors was a success for the sake of argument; but I will offer two more considerations that I believe show that AT is true and are sufficient to falsify premise (1) of the argument.

3. *Causal deviance and doxastic control*

The current orthodoxy in the philosophy of action and epistemology takes the relationship between practical reasons and actions and epistemic reasons and beliefs to be causal. With respect to action, the causalist orthodoxy can be expressed by this rough schema.

Any behavior *A* of an agent *S* is an action iff (i) *S*'s *A*-ing is proximately and non-deviantly caused by some non-actional mental items *R* and (ii) *R* constitute *S*'s reasons for *A*-ing.

If we assume that all actions are intentional under a description³ and that the performance of an intentional action is a paradigmatic instance of the exercise of direct voluntary control by an agent, then in order for anything to be under the direct voluntary control of an agent it must be such that it is like the control an agent exercises over an intentional action. As the schema states, this requires that the behavior not be deviantly caused by the agent's reasons.⁴ For instance, Sue may desire to shoot Bob. Her desire to shoot Bob is so strong that it causes her to shake and she finds herself pulling the trigger of her gun, the result being that Bob is shot. While the outcome of Sue's trigger-pulling was what she desired, Sue's behavior is the direct consequence of primary causal deviance. Her trigger-pulling was not under her direct voluntary control. It was not an action. Action theorists treat such cases as instances of *mere behavior*, but not action. The causal history of the event determines its ontological status, whether it is an action or mere behavior.

Assuming there is a similar phenomenon of causal deviance that sometimes occurs with respect to coming to believe, does the absence or presence of causal deviance in the case of coming to believe affect doxastic control and the ontological status of the event of coming to form an attitude and the status of the attitude itself? I believe it does not. Consider the following example. Suppose Juan is hiking in Alaska. He is terrified of grizzlies. Juan comes across some fresh bear-scat, notices movement in the

³ See Davidson 1980, p. 50. Myles Brand rejects this assumption, which he refers to as 'The Intentionality Thesis' (in Brand 1984, pp. 31-32).

⁴ To make my presentation less cumbersome I am here referring to reasons as causes. The reader may object and insist that either mental events associated with some mental state (e.g., the acquisition of a reason for acting) or some neural realizers of mental events are what cause action. If this is the case, the reader should simply regard the language of reasons as causes as shorthand for whatever mental event is associated with the rationalizing mental state.

bushes in front of him to his right, and hears what sounds like the grunting of a grizzly. Overcome with fear, Juan finds himself believing that there is a grizzly bear just ahead of him. Juan has evidence that there is a grizzly in front of him. However, suppose his belief is caused in a manner similar to Sue's trigger-pulling (his fear, in this case, is the proximal cause of his belief). Unlike Sue's trigger-pulling, Juan's control (or complete lack thereof) over coming to believe is not different than it would have been if it were non-deviantly caused. Juan believes that there is a grizzly. Moreover, if you ask him why he believes there is a grizzly he will mention the evidence he has for believing, not the event that was deviantly caused and explains why he came to believe in the first place.⁵ Contrast this with the case of Sue, who may report that she got nervous and accidentally pulled the trigger, only she was lucky enough to shoot Bob. Sue may say that she did not mean to shoot Bob at the moment she did (or perhaps that she did not even mean to shoot Bob at all, her desire to shoot him notwithstanding), whereas Juan would not report that he did not mean to believe as he does.

The opponent of AT such as Montmarquet may first respond as follows. A deviantly caused belief *is* less under the control of an agent. This is so because the belief formed would not have differed appropriately had the evidence differed somewhat.⁶ So, for instance, in Juan's case, he would not have been properly responsive to the evidence and so would have formed the belief that a grizzly was nearby in spite of some significant change in his environment that he was in contact with that would have led him to believe differently (e.g., it may have been a black bear or a friend trying to scare him).

The opponent of AT is correct. Juan is not properly responsive to the evidence. However, it is not obvious that this affects any control he may have over coming to believe. Reflect for a moment on a case of primary causal deviance in acting. You want to *X*, you get excited about *X*-ing, and your excitement causes you to *X*. You might report to yourself or those around you that you did not mean to *X*, at least not at that moment. Would Juan report that he did not mean to form the belief that a grizzly was nearby? I suspect he would not. In cases similar to Juan's, I would be prone to report that I had not noticed something about my environment that counted against my believing that a grizzly was nearby. Yet I would still insist that I believed a grizzly was nearby because of my experiences, even if I admit that I failed to be responsive to my environment due to my fear of grizzlies. I would not say that I did not mean to *do* something in coming to believe. If I failed to do anything, I would admit that I failed to properly attend to some evidence. Intentionally attending to the evidence is a mental action that is under my control and precedes coming to believe. My fear both caused my grizzly belief and affected what I attended to in my environment. However, the outcome of attending, *viz.*, coming to believe, is an automatic response to my attending to some features of my

⁵ In effect, I take it that Juan would tell you why he should believe as he does. That is, he would mention the reasons that justify his believing and not all of the reasons that explain his belief.

⁶ Randolph Clarke offered this response.

environment (barring causal deviance, of course). Given my fear, I was less attentive, which made me less receptive to some features of my environment. In any case, my *control* over the event of coming to believe is not affected by any deviant causal chain that obtains between my acquisition of evidence and the formation of my belief. My control over attending may be affected, but any direct control over belief is not—even if my belief is the effect of my fear. I suspect things would be similar in cases such as Juan’s.⁷

The opponent of AT may not be satisfied with my reply thus far. She may assert the following in response. Coming to believe and performing an action are both under our control. But while some behavior fails to be an action because of deviant causal chains, our control over beliefs is never affected by causal deviance.

Such a reply is question begging and fails to take AT seriously. Recall that, as formulated by Montmarquet, AT is the thesis that “belief and action are ‘asymmetrical’ with respect to direct voluntary control” (1986, p. 49). If one denies AT, then it seems that one must be committed to the claim that coming to believe and action are symmetrical with respect to direct voluntary control. I take it this means that they admit of the same conditions of control. Anyone who claims that coming to believe is not affected by causal deviance and can still be under an agent’s control but that causal deviance affects whether or not some behavior is actional seems committed to the truth of AT. Such a claim implies that belief and action are asymmetrical with respect to direct voluntary control. Belief can be under our direct voluntary control whether or not it is deviantly caused (an admittedly odd result that will raise the eyebrows of many action theorists), but whether or not some behavior is under our control in the manner suitable for it to be actional is affected by causal deviance. So AT is true.

In concluding this section, I believe the following should be obvious. *Deviant causal chains do not vitiate or enhance the control an agent exercises in the case of belief. But they affect agent-control in the case of action—it makes the difference between whether or not an event is mere behavior or an action.* So belief and action appear to be asymmetrical with respect to the controlling influence of reasons. Specifically, the role of reasons in the etiology of a belief does not affect whether or not the event of coming to

⁷ James Montmarquet offered the following reply in correspondence (July 28, 2006). “Roughly, one might distinguish between a ‘taking-in evidence’ function and a higher order ‘monitoring’ function in the case of belief. Apparently, fear has shut down the latter, resulting in a *prima facie* loss of control.” I take it that the function of attending is to monitor features of one’s environment and also to ensure that the proper doxastic attitudes are formed in response to the inputs from an agent’s environment; and attending qua mental action is controlled via an intention (I discuss the role of intentions in controlling behavior in the next section). Fear does not somehow negatively affect the monitoring function of epistemic reasons. Rather, it affects an agent’s attending to evidence, thereby making her less vulnerable to being responsive to epistemic reasons. Responsiveness to epistemic reasons occupies the ‘taking-in evidence’ function. The reasons themselves do nothing to affect control one way or another, they are simply that to which an epistemic agent forms a doxastic attitude in response, where the forming of the attitude is more like a reflex and less like an intentional action. In any case, Montmarquet offers a helpful distinction between the functions of cognitive mechanisms; but it fails to show that I somehow get things wrong in my assessment of the affect of causal deviance on doxastic control.

believe is under an agent's control in the same way that the causal influence of reasons affects an action.

4. Intentions and doxastic control

The opponent of AT, such as Montmarquet, may not be convinced by my arguments in the previous section. But by examining the means whereby many action theorists have addressed the problem of causal-deviance an important condition for direct voluntary control emerges that will cast serious doubt on the possibility of belief and action being symmetrical with respect to control, particularly with respect to the controlling influence of reasons.

In instances of causal deviance an agent's reasons for acting are merely ballistic causes of her behavior, causing activity in a manner similar to how the contact of a foot with a ball brings about the movement of the ball. A common strategy among those who endorse causal theories of action has been to argue that the causal relationship between the proximal cause of some behavior cannot be a mere ballistic cause, the mental items that cause and render some behavior actional must also causally sustain the behavior, guiding and monitoring it through its completion, remaining responsive to afferent feedback. This has led many to insist that an intention is the proximal cause of behavior that is actional, or the behavior must at least be within the motivational potential of an intention. Intentions are irreducible executive mental states that serve as the instruments of control in the etiology of action.⁸ Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, *intentions mediate an agent's reasons for acting* (e.g., a desire or a desire-belief complex). Merely being caused to *A* when one wants to *A* or wants some end *E* and believes that by *A*-ing one can achieve *E* absent having the proper intention to *A* that guides and monitors the agents *A*-ing are not by themselves sufficient for controlling behavior in the way necessary for action. Direct voluntary control over action is exercised via our intentions.

The asymmetry between the role of reasons with respect to control over belief and action is most obvious when we consider the role of intentions with respect to controlling each. Reasons for believing *p* are the proximal cause of coming to believe *p* when a belief is non-deviantly caused. *In the case of coming to believe, no intentions mediate our epistemic reasons or must play the executive role necessary in the case of action to safeguard against causal deviance.* Moreover, as noted above, the presence of causal deviance does nothing to affect the status of a belief with respect to control. So intentions are not necessary. An agent's control over coming to believe is not affected in the

⁸ For defenses of this sort of claim about intentions, see Bishop (1989), Brand (1984), and Mele (1992). It is important that the intentions play the proper causal role, sustaining, guiding, and monitoring an agent's acting. Otherwise, merely having an intention cause an action can still result in a deviant causal chain. Thanks to James Montmarquet for bringing this to my attention.

same way as action in cases of primary causal deviance. But if intentions are the means whereby behavior that is actional is subject to direct voluntary control, then coming to believe is not under our direct voluntary control. So it is not the case that belief and action are the same with respect to the controlling function of reason in their etiology.

It may be argued that one's belief that p could be caused by an intention to make up one's mind about p .⁹ I will grant that this does sometimes occur. But in such cases coming to believe is the intentional outcome of one's agency and so it is the consequence of one's action and not under one's control in the same way as an action. Specifically, coming to believe is under one's *indirect* voluntary control in such cases. So one's intention is not the proximal cause of coming to believe, even if it figures in the causal history of one's coming to believe by guiding one's activities aimed at acquiring a belief. Why should we think this? To make up one's mind about p one must consider truth-relevant considerations. This may involve bringing to your mind whatever little evidence you may have regarding p , and the strength of the doxastic attitude formed will no doubt be a function of the evidence entertained. But the epistemic reasons considered will be the direct cause of coming to believe. So if anything is under one's direct voluntary control, it is the activity aimed at making up one's mind regarding p .

5. Conclusion

I have offered two more considerations in favor of AT which Montmarquet did not consider back in 1986. So long as belief and action are asymmetrical in at least one of the ways I have argued, AT is safe.¹⁰

⁹ Randolph Clarke raised this objection.

¹⁰ Thanks to Randolph Clarke and James Montmarquet for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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