

On the possibility of doxastic venture: a reply to Buckareff

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Abstract: In response to Buckareff,¹ I agree that it is indeed impossible intentionally and directly to acquire a belief one judges not to be supported by one's evidence. But Jamesian doxastic venture does not involve any such direct self-inducing of belief: it is rather a matter of an agent's *taking* to be true in practical reasoning what she *already*, through some 'passional', non-epistemic, cause, *holds* true beyond the support of her evidence. To deny that beliefs may sometimes have passional causes is, I argue, purely a rationalist dogma. I do concede to Buckareff, however, that a venture of faith might sometimes be sub-doxastic, in the sense that full practical commitment is made to faith-propositions without actual belief. That concession requires only a minor modification, however, to a doxastic-venture model of faith.

Can faith involve doxastic venture? If doxastic venture amounted to the intentional action of directly acquiring a belief in response to some non-epistemic reason for wanting to have that belief (as Andrei Buckareff seems generally to assume), doxastic venture would indeed be impossible. For reasons well expressed by Bernard Williams, we necessarily lack a capacity for *directly* controlling what beliefs we hold.² (Our exercise of control over what beliefs we hold can only be *indirect*; either by rational means – e.g. through our control over our exposure to evidence – or non-rational means – e.g. through getting ourselves hypnotized, taking psychotropic drugs, etc.) We do, however, have direct control over what we *take to be true in our practical reasoning*. We thus directly control whether and to what degree our beliefs influence our actions. An agent who believes that *p* is thereby disposed to perform the (mental) *action* of taking *p* to be true in his practical reasoning; an agent so disposed may thus be able to choose *not* to act in accordance with that disposition. For example: I have an entrenched belief that men who wear suede shoes are not to be trusted; yet, recognizing that I have no evidence for its truth beyond my father's repeated avowals, I suspect

myself of sheer prejudice and may be able to ensure that, in the way I act towards *this* suede-shoe wearer, I do not take my belief to be true at all.

Once this locus of control over what we take true in our practical reasoning is recognized, the true nature of doxastic venturing may be appreciated. An agent ventures doxastically when she actively takes to be true what she *already* holds true, even though she judges the truth of her belief not to be supported by her evidence. She *could* block her disposition to take *p* to be true, yet she ventures to act in accordance with it – by *letting herself* take *p* to be true, despite recognizing her lack of evidential support for *p*'s truth. Jamesian doxastic venturing, then, is not a matter of self-inducing a belief from some non-epistemic motive; it is a matter of active commitment to the truth of a proposition despite consciously recognizing that one's belief that the proposition is true has other than 'evidential' causes.³

Doxastic venture is possible, then, *provided* 'passionally' caused belief is a real possibility. But surely it is? A bereaved son's emotions may cause him to believe that his dead father is still somehow with him. Or, a person's heart may be strangely warmed through hearing the Gospel preached, causing her to believe that Christ is her saviour. Buckareff's arguments for rejecting passionately caused belief are unpersuasive. Buckareff holds that part of *what it means* to say that beliefs 'aim at truth' is that the 'belief that *p* is acquired and maintained in response to evidence for the truth of *p*' (438). He concedes that non-epistemic influences may affect people's beliefs, but maintains that this can happen only indirectly, by biasing their assessment of their evidence (440). Buckareff therefore thinks there is something paradoxical ('in the vicinity of Moore's paradox' (439)) about a person's believing that *p* while yet accepting that her evidence does not support *p*'s truth.

This view seems to me, however, to be no more than a rationalist dogma. The fact that one cannot directly decide to believe from passionate motivation does not entail that beliefs cannot have passionate causes.⁴ To believe is, indeed, to believe true; but to believe true is not necessarily to believe evident.⁵ Exposure to evidence for a proposition's truth is a standard cause of belief, and a cause intrinsic to belief's 'proper functioning' without which, no doubt, believing could not have evolved to be what it is. Nevertheless, there are other, non-epistemic, ways in which beliefs can be caused. And, if there are some beliefs – 'framework principles' (such as the belief that God exists may arguably be supposed to be under evidential ambiguity) – whose truth *could not in principle* be settled evidentially, the only kind of cause they could possibly have is a non-evidential one.

Since he thinks doxastic venture impossible, whatever venture is involved in taking some faith-proposition to be true can, for Buckareff, only be 'sub-doxastic'. My case for the real possibility of Jamesian doxastic venturing might be granted, and yet it still be denied that doxastic venture is *essential* to theistic

faith: perhaps all that is necessary is, as Richard Swinburne has suggested, (preparedness to) act on the assumption that there is a God?⁶ That concession should, I think, be made. As against Buckareff, I maintain that faith *can*, and typically does, involve doxastic venture, but I agree with him to the extent of accepting that faith *may* sometimes involve a venture in active commitment that is, in a certain sense, sub-doxastic.

Authentic faith requires a certain kind of fullness of commitment: a merely tentative or experimental theistic faith is, I think, close enough to a contradiction in terms. The kind of 'full commitment' required is, I suggest, a preparedness to take faith-propositions to be true *with belief-grade weight* in one's practical reasoning. If that is correct, however, whether or not one actually believes may be irrelevant. When characterizing doxastic venture previously,⁷ I used the notion of 'believing acceptance' to mean *confidently taking the relevant proposition true in one's practical reasoning* (i.e. with belief-grade weight) *while also having the propositional attitude of holding that proposition true*. The two factors in this notion may be conceptually distinguished, however; they will be psychologically separable if people may be motivated to make belief-grade pragmatic commitment to a proposition's truth without actually holding it true.

Such a motivation occurs in anyone who has reason to pretend to believe – but pretending to believe that God exists seems inconsistent with authentic faith. (Consider the Pascalian Wagerer who starts off, in effect, pretending to believe, but does not achieve meritorious faith unless and until his pretence transmutes into genuine belief.) The saints who experience 'the dark night of the soul' might perhaps be interpreted as continuing to be practically committed to God's existence even though they no longer believe – although a more natural interpretation, I think, is that they continue to believe despite ceasing to have any experience of God's presence. But the kind of situation to which Swinburne draws attention surely does count as a case of sub-doxastic faith in God. This is the situation of the person who commits himself in practice to God's existence and trustworthiness even though he believes no more than that there is a non-negligible probability that this claim is true, because he believes that only if God does exist and is trustworthy can the supreme good be achieved and he desires to align his action with the possibility of the achievement of the supreme good.

To sum up. There is a wide consensus that theistic faith involves venturing. But the identification of the kind of venture or ventures involved remains contentious. Some maintain a ('fiducial-venture') model according to which the only venture is the act of trusting God (rather than self, possessions, or any human powers) in a context where one is evidentially justified in believing that God exists and is to be trusted. The rival ('doxastic-venture') model holds that, as well as – and logically prior to – the venture of trust in God, faith requires the venture of confidently taking to be true in one's practical reasoning faith-propositions whose truth one recognizes not to be supported by one's evidence. This rival

model remains intact in its essentials if it is conceded – as I have been prepared to concede in response to Buckareff – that active commitment to faith-propositions beyond the evidence could sometimes be sub-doxastic, in the sense that the agent makes it without holding the propositions concerned to have any more than a non-negligible probability of being true. For, what is essential to this model is *full*, ‘belief-grade’, *practical commitment* to the truth of faith-propositions beyond the evidence, *whether that commitment is accompanied by actual belief or not*.

This model might thus, perhaps, more inclusively, be called a ‘*cognitive-venture*’ model – though, as I have here argued against Buckareff, promoters of a cognitive-venture model have no good reason to think that commitment beyond the evidence can *only* be sub-doxastic. Fully doxastic venture is a real possibility. Whether one should, all things considered, adopt a cognitive-venture rather than a fiducial-venture model of faith is, of course, a further question – and one’s views on that question will be influenced by one’s judgement on the possibility of evidential justification for the cognitive content of theistic faith. We are not, however, compelled to adopt a purely fiducial-venture model of faith on the grounds that the kind of venture beyond the evidence posited by the rival cognitive-venture model is not a real possibility – and on that important point Buckareff and I do not disagree. So, especially for those who think that theistic faith-propositions cannot be evidentially justified, the project of investigating the conditions under which cognitive (and, as I maintain, typically, fully doxastic) ventures may be permissible is an important one.⁸

Notes

1. Andrei A. Buckareff ‘Can faith be a doxastic venture?’, *Religious Studies*, 41 (2005), 435–445. Page references are to this article.
2. See Bernard Williams ‘Deciding to believe’, in *idem Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 148.
3. Robert J. Vanden Burgt makes essentially the same point: ‘If ... James’s argument is understood as justifying belief, not generating it, then the belief he is talking about need not be seen as the simple product of a deliberative and calculating will. Instead, it becomes a belief toward which we are inclined by the deeper forces of our being, and the question becomes whether we should *refrain* from such a belief because of its objective uncertainty’; *The Religious Philosophy of William James* (Chicago IL: Nelson-Hall, 1981), 69.
4. Buckareff is, I think, tempted to affirm this entailment. Having noted that it is ‘conceptually impossible to self-consciously decide to take the attitude of belief towards a proposition and immediately consciously acquire the intended belief where the belief is not acquired in response to epistemic reasons but solely in response to the formation of an intention to believe’, Buckareff continues by saying: ‘*Similarly*, it seems that this feature of belief would count against the conceptual possibility of consciously acquiring and sustaining a belief that *p*, based on one’s *passional* nature and not on one’s evidence for the truth of *p*’; 439, my emphasis.
5. Unless, that is, one defines what it is for a person to believe that *p* as a matter of her believing that *p* is more probable than any alternative, as Richard Swinburne once did in his *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981). Swinburne later withdrew this definition, however, accepting cogent criticisms made by William Alston. See Richard Swinburne *Epistemic Justification* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 36, n.8; and William P. Alston ‘Swinburne on faith and belief’, in Alan G. Padgett (ed.) *Reason and the*

Christian Religion (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). I am indebted to Imran Aijaz for drawing my attention to the fact that Buckareff's account of how doxastic venture would involve something close to Moore's Paradox may implicitly assume Swinburne's earlier, and rightly rejected, account of belief.

6. See Swinburne *Faith and Reason*, 116–117. For further discussion see my 'Faith as doxastic venture', *Religious Studies*, 38 (2002), 471–487, 479. Buckareff discusses Joshua L. Golding's defence of a similar view (440–441).
7. Bishop 'Faith as doxastic venture', 474.
8. I am grateful to Andrei Buckareff, Imran Aijaz, and the editor of this journal for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this reply.