Coming to Believe*

Nicholas Koziolek†

August 26, 2016

Abstract

This essay develops and defends a view of belief on which the rationality of a belief is generally to be explained, at least in part, by a past act in which it was formed or confirmed. On the proposed view, the belief that *p* is a single-track disposition: the disposition to judge that *p*. This view, it is argued, avoids difficult problems that beset views on which judgments merely cause beliefs, but does so without recourse to the more radical suggestion (due to Matthew Boyle, among other) that believing is an activity rather than a state.

I Introduction

1. Plausibly, the question "Why do you believe that?" admits of two subtly different readings. On the first, an appropriate answer must explain how you came to believe what you believe. On the second, it must instead provide the reasons for which you now believe it. On the face of it, of course, these two readings are not so deeply different. For example, if you believe that there are deer in these woods, and someone asks you why, your answer might be "Because I saw some there yesterday." And your answer seems to tell

*This is a draft. Please do not cite without permission.

†Email: nkoziolek@gmail.com. Website: nicholaskoziolek.wordpress.com.

your interlocutor both how you came to believe what you believe and why—for what reason—you believe it still.

2. Nonetheless, some philosophers claim to find a deep difference between the two readings. According to Matthew Boyle, for example, "if we possess the capacity for doxastic self-determination, this capacity is *not* exercised in acts of changing our belief-state, installing new beliefs or modifying existing ones" (2011: 19, my emphasis); instead, "we exercise our capacity for cognitive self-determination [. . .] in *holding* whatever beliefs we hold" (2009: 127, his emphasis). On this view, there are two genuinely distinct questions: how you came to believe what you believe, and why—for what reason—you believe it still. And if we are interested in rationality—in what Boyle calls "doxastic" or "cognitive self-determination"—our interest is in the second question alone. In other words: it is a mistake to suppose that the acts in which beliefs are "installed" and "modified" play any role in explaining the later rationality of those beliefs.

3. Boyle develops his view in opposition to a view on which coming to believe—that is, "installing" or "modifying" a belief—is a process. On this view, coming to believe that *p*, for example, is a process in which, first, you judge that *p*, and then, second, that judgment causes you to believe that *p*. I think that Boyle is right to reject this sort of view. In particular, it puts far too much distance between acts of reasoning and the beliefs they make rational (or purport to). But I also think that, in his attempts to develop an alternative, Boyle himself ends up losing sight of certain connections between beliefs and the acts in which they are formed and confirmed (or "installed" and "modified")—connections that, I will argue, are crucial to a proper understanding of both.

4. My aim in this essay, then, is to develop a view on which the rationality of a belief is to be explained, at least in part, by a past act in which it was formed or confirmed. On this view, the rationality of a perceptual belief will be explained, at least in part, by a past act

of perceiving (just as my opening example suggests); the rationality of an inferential belief will be explained by a past act of inferring; the rationality of a testimonial belief will be explained by a past act of receiving testimony; and so on.[1]

5. I should stress here at the outset that (although my talk of "coming to believe" may suggest otherwise) the past act that is relevant to the rationality of a belief need not be the act in which that belief was first formed. As I have said, it may instead be an act in which a previously held belief was *confirmed*. So you might, for example, first come to believe something on the basis of testimony and then later confirm that testimony through perception. If you

[1] "But what if, as the result of, say, being hit over the head, you come to believe both (i) that *p* and (ii) that you came to believe that *p* on the basis of (say) perception? In that case, doesn't the fact that you believe that you came to believe that *p* on the basis of perception make your belief that *p* at least minimally rational?" I do want to grant that, in such a case, your belief that *p* is at least minimally rational, and that it is minimally rational precisely because you believe (albeit falsely) that you came to believe that *p* on the basis of perception. Such cases are, I admit, exceptions to the claim that appears in the text. For that reason, the claim I ultimately want to accept is not actually quite as strong as the one given in the text. But I don't want to get into these rather complicated issues here. So, for present purposes, it will have to suffice for me to say that the view I ultimately want to defend requires only that, in a case like this one, the rationality of the belief that *p* is to be explained, at least in part, by your *belief* that your belief that *p* was formed or confirmed in a past epistemic act (as I call it): an act of perceiving, inferring, receiving testimony, or the like (that is, an act of a kind in which knowledge is sometimes acquired). In other words, the result I care about here is only that our account of what it is for a belief to be rational be given in terms of the concept of an epistemic act. And I assume that when we say that a belief is rational if its subject *believes* that it was formed or confirmed in an appropriate epistemic act (even if that belief is false), we do explain what it is for a belief to be rational partly in terms of the concept of an epistemic act. As I see matters, a defense of this kind of view ultimately rests on a particular account of what it is for an epistemic act to be self-conscious. I sketch the account I prefer in Koziolek manuscript(b), with particular reference to the act of inferring. In the present essay, however, I will simply ignore cases in which beliefs are only, as I have put it, "minimally" rational, and focus on those beliefs that are actually formed or confirmed in past epistemic acts. (I am indebted here to Errol Lord and Jonathan Way, one of whom is responsible for the example, and both of whom are responsible for persuading me that I eventually need to say quite a lot about such examples.)

later come to think that the testimony you received was unreliable, the past act that is relevant to the rationality of your belief is not the testimonial act, but the later perceptual act. Similarly, so long as you continue to think both that the testimonial act was reliable and that the perceptual act was veridical, *both* of these past acts will be relevant to the rationality of your belief (in other words, the rationality of your belief will be "overdetermined"). So my central claim, again, is just that the rationality of a present belief is always to be explained (at least in part) by past acts in which that belief was either formed or confirmed.[2] And the upshot is that, in order to understand what it is to believe something for a reason, we need to understand the relation between beliefs and the acts in which they are formed and confirmed. In that, I side with Boyle's opponent. But I agree with Boyle that we cannot understand this relation in the way his opponent does.

6. Before I begin, I should note that, in the two papers cited above, Boyle begins from the assumption that we are in some sense directly responsible for our beliefs, and he uses that assumption to argue that believing must be an exercise of rational agency, and not (as the targets of his critique suggest) merely the effect of one. I think that Boyle's "argument from responsibility," as we might call it, is actually independent of certain of the other arguments he gives in his two papers, arguments that I will discuss in §§III and IV. I also think that both arguments (or sets of arguments) are interesting and complicated enough that each deserves a discussion of its own. So, in the present essay, I will simply set aside issues pertaining to responsibility and agency. My aim here is thus only to show that we can give acts in which beliefs are formed and confirmed a central role in the theory of belief without committing ourselves to the view that coming to believe is a process, and so without inappropriately

[2] Subject, of course, to the qualification discussed in note 1 above.

distancing acts of reasoning from the beliefs they make rational (or, again, purport to).[3]

7. I begin, however, with the view Boyle opposes, a view he calls *the Process Theory*.

[3] I will say, however, that it is Boyle's concern with responsibility and agency that seems to me to lead him to the view that believing is, as he puts it, "an activity in stasis" (2009: 141). The relevant line of reasoning seems to work like this. First, Boyle assumes that we are in some sense directly responsible for our beliefs, and that we can be directly responsible for our beliefs only if they are exercises of rational agency. Since agency implies activity, however, it follows that belief is not a state, at least in the ordinary sense. But, because belief is obviously a state in some sense, Boyle argues that we should admit the possibility of "an activity in stasis," or a state that is in some sense "active."

Boyle provides only a sketch of a view of these "activities in stasis," but it seems to me that what he does say involves a conflation of two importantly distinct notions: that of *an exercise of rational agency*, and that of *an actualization of a rational capacity*. In fact, at one point, Boyle says that we need "to recognize another *form of agency*, [one] that [does] not consist in actively changing things to produce a certain result, but in actively being a certain way" (2011: 19, my emphasis), while, at another point, he says that "we should leave room for a *form of actualization* of an active capacity [. . .] that consists, not in bringing about a certain result, but in being in a certain condition" (2011: 20, my emphasis). But he gives the impression that he means to be making the same point in both of these passages—despite his mention of *agency* in the first and *actualization* in the second.

It is thus not entirely clear to me what Boyle means when he says that believing is an activity. Does he mean that it is an activity in something like the sense in which walking (i.e., taking a stroll), for example, is an activity (although, as he stresses, without being an intentional action)? Or does he mean that it is an actualization of a rational capacity (of, say, the capacity to represent the world as being a certain way)? Or does he mean both at once? I'm not really sure. At any rate, one consequence of the argument of the present essay is that—as I would put it—rejecting the sort of view Boyle opposes does not require us to say that belief is an exercise of rational agency, but only that it is an actualization of a rational capacity. Perhaps the argument from responsibility shows that it must also be an exercise of rational agency. For my own part, I doubt that it does. But the question hangs on what exactly Boyle means by 'responsibility' and 'agency'. If he thinks, for example, that every actualization of a rational capacity is an exercise of agency in the relevant sense, and so something we are responsible for (again, in the relevant sense), then I have no objection. But, again, I will leave discussion of these issues for another occasion.

II The Process Theory

8. According to one recent and influential account of the relation between reasoning and belief, "[o]rdinarily, the reasoning that is meant to issue or not issue in a belief is meant to do so by first issuing or not issuing in a judgment" (Shah and Velleman 2005: 503). On this view, coming to believe something—or, at any rate, coming to believe something on the basis of reasoning—is a process: coming to believe that *p*, for example, is a process in which, first, you judge that *p* (on the basis of an appropriate piece of reasoning) and then, second, your judging that *p* causes you to believe that *p*. This is, in its essentials, the view that Boyle calls *the Process Theory*.[4]

9. As stated, the Process Theory is supported by three related claims.[5] The first is that belief is a mental state, while judging is a mental act—that is, a kind of mental event. The second is that, when you judge that *p*, you typically thereafter believe that *p* (at least until you change your mind).[6] And the third is that you can judge that *p*

[4] Process Theorists include Broome (2013: 77–78), Cassam (2010), McHugh (2011, 2013), Peacocke (1998), Shah and Velleman (2005), Shoemaker (2009), and Toribio (2011).

[5] These claims are especially explicit in Cassam 2010: 81–84.

[6] You might be tempted to add: "or until you forget." But forgetting is arguably compatible with believing. After all, you often remember things you'd previously forgotten, something you couldn't do if the thing you'd forgotten weren't in some sense present in your mind. Or, to put it another way: there's a difference between (i) forgetting and then remembering and (ii) forgetting and then learning again. Whether the former involves continuing to believe is of course debatable; but it is at least plausible that you go on believing until (in some difficult-to-specify sense) you *couldn't possibly* remember the relevant content. On the view I prefer (which I defend in part in §VII, below), *remembering* involves the actualization of a previously held belief—one that was somehow being prevented from actualizing itself—while *learning again* involves the acquisition of a new belief, though one with the same content as one you'd held in the past. (Cp. Mandelbaum 2016: §6.)

In this connection, it is interesting to note that Freud was apparently tempted to deny that anything can even *be* forgotten in the second, stronger, sense: "This brings us to the more general problem of preservation in the sphere of the mind. [. . .] Since we overcame the error of supposing that the forgetting we are familiar with signified a destruction of the memory-trace—that is, its annihilation—we have been inclined

without then or thereafter believing that *p*; more precisely: the fact that you judge that *p* does not entail either that you believe that *p* or that you ever will believe that *p*. (I will often abbreviate this third claim by saying simply that you can judge that *p* without believing that *p*, or that judging that *p* does not entail believing that *p*.)

10. We can argue from these three claims to the Process Theory in the following way. First, since belief is a mental state, the change from not believing something to believing it is a change of state. But every change of state is an event. So the change from not believing something to believing it is an event. Second, because, typically, when you judge that *p*, you thereafter believe that *p*, it is plausible that judging that *p* either *is* the change from not believing that *p* to believing it or is one of the things that can *cause* that change. But, third, and finally, because judging that *p* does not entail believing that *p*, judging that *p* cannot *be* the change from not believing that *p* to believing it. So it is plausible that judging that *p* is one of the things that can cause that change.

11. To put it a bit more simply, the idea here is that the first claim—that belief is a mental state—motivates the search for an account of the formation of belief on which it is an event of some kind. The second claim—that, typically, when you judge that *p* you thereafter believe that *p*—then provides some evidence that the formation of the belief that *p* at least sometimes involves the act of judging that *p*. But the third claim—that you can judge that *p* without believing that *p*—entails that the act of judging that *p* is distinct from the event of forming the belief that *p*. Thus, those who accept all three claims seem to have good reason to conclude that coming to believe something on the basis of reasoning is a process, one in which, first,

to take the opposite view, that in mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish—that everything is somehow preserved and that in suitable circumstances [. . .] it can once more be brought to light" (1931: 16). But my point here is only that Freud's question was a sensible one, and that it is far from clear when forgetting in the weaker sense shades off into ceasing to belief, i.e., forgetting in the stronger sense (if, indeed, it ever does).

you judge that *p* (on the basis of an appropriate piece of reasoning) and then, second, your judging that *p* causes you to believe that *p*.

III Coming to believe is not a process

12. The problem with the Process Theory is that judging that *p* entails believing that *p*. In other words, the third claim cited in support of the Process Theory—that you can judge that *p* without believing that *p*—is false. The result is that coming to believe cannot be broken up into two stages, as it is when coming to believe something on the basis of reasoning is said to involve, first, judging that *p* (on the basis of an appropriate piece of reasoning) and then, second, that judgment's causing you to believe that *p*. For, as soon as you have judged that *p*, you believe that *p*, and there is no causal work left for the judgment to do.[7]

13. What persuades Process Theorists that you can judge that *p* without believing that *p* are examples like the following, due to Christopher Peacocke:

> Someone may *judge* that undergraduate degrees from countries other than [her] own are of an equal standard to her own, and excellent reasons may be operative in her assertions to that effect. All the same, it may be quite clear, in decisions she

[7] To be clear, although I will often speak of the Process Theory in temporal terms, the objection here isn't ultimately temporal. That is, the objection isn't to the view that the event of judging that *p precedes* the event of coming to believe that *p*. (The Process Theorist could of course give up that view, by allowing that causes needn't precede their effects, but may be simultaneous with them.) Rather, the objection is to the view that you can judge that *p* without *then* believing that *p*. And the Process Theorist will want to hold onto that view even if he takes the view that the event of judging that *p* is simultaneous with the event of coming to believe that *p*. The objection is thus that any merely causal connection between judging and coming to believe will be too weak. The objection is *not* that there is a problematic temporal gap between judging and coming to believe. (Though I also don't mean to imply that this latter objection is not a good one. It is, however, superceded by the stronger objection that judging that *p* entails believing that *p*.) Cf. note 12 below.

> makes on hiring, or in making recommendations, that she does not really have this *belief* at all. (1998: 90, my emphases)

Process Theorists frequently treat these examples as decisive.[8] But, crucially, they can be decisive on their own only if we assume an extremely tight connection between *judgment* and *assertion*, on the one hand, and between *belief* and *action*, on the other. Only if we assume the former connection can we infer from the subject's assertions to her judgment. And only if we assume the latter connection can we infer from her decisions on hiring to her belief.

14. But why make these assumptions? Consider just the second. (The first raises issues that would take us too far afield, though some of what I say in §VII is relevant.) Peacocke, and those who follow him, seem to assume that the only possible explanation of the fact that the subject in the example rarely votes to hire candidates with foreign degrees—at least when they are up against candidates with domestic degrees—is that she does not really *believe* that foreign and domestic degrees are of equal worth. I think it's much more plausible, though, that she simply has a *bias* against candidates with foreign degrees, in the sense that, when she considers candidates with foreign degrees, she tends in general to downplay their strengths and emphasize their weaknesses, whereas, when she considers candidates with domestic degrees, she tends to emphasize their strengths and downplay their weaknesses—especially when the two candidates are being considered for the same position. There is, it seems to me, an important difference between the subject who is merely biased in this way and the subject who actually believes that foreign degrees are worth less than domestic degrees. In particular, the latter, unlike the former, would count the fact that a given candidate has a foreign degree as a *reason* to discount that candidate. But the former subject does not so treat it—not even implicitly. To

[8] For a particularly striking instance of this treatment, see Cassam 2010: 81.

say that she does would be to annihilate the distinction between reasoning and other, non-rational, mental processes.[9]

15. Similar issues arise with respect to other examples. Thus, according to Nishi Shah and David Velleman, "[o]ne may reason one's way to the conclusion that one's plane is not going to crash [. . .] and yet find oneself still believing that it will" (2005: 507). In such a case, they say, "an irrational phobia has had a dominant hand in determining what one believes" (2005: 508). Here again, though, there is no obvious reason to think that there must be a belief in play. For it might be that what explains the relevant action—your refusal to get on the plane, for example—is not a belief that the plane will crash (which, *ex hypothesi*, you do not have), but instead your (even by your own lights, irrational) *fear* that it will. Shah and Velleman's assumption seems to be that your phobia cannot directly cause your action, and that the relation between your phobia and your action must therefore be mediated by the belief that your plane is going to crash. But, again, why make that assumption?

16. In both of these cases, what seems to lie behind the inference from a certain action to a certain belief is the assumption that that particular belief is the only thing that could (in conjunction with assumed desires) explain the action in question. But this assumption is just false. It is perfectly possible to know full well, for example, that skydiving is safe—that the risk is negligible—without being

[9] Mandelbaum (2016) has recently argued that implicit biases should be understood as propositionally contentful mental states, and has suggested that a plausible hypothesis is that they are unconscious beliefs. I'm not persuaded by the evidence he provides in favor of the view that implicit biases have propositional structure (for one thing, he considers only the possibility that implicit biases are associative structures, and so says nothing against the view, which I take in the text, that they are instead collections of dispositions, which may well include dispositions to form or revise certain propositionally contentful mental states without themselves *being* propositionally structured). And I'm even less persuaded by his reasons for thinking that implicit biases are *beliefs*. But, even so, nothing I say here is actually incompatible with the view that implicit biases are *unconscious* beliefs. Thus, in what follows, you might want to take 'belief' to mean 'conscious belief'.

able to bring yourself to jump out of the plane. Similarly, it is perfectly possible for you to believe that members of different races, say, are equally worthy of respect and consideration and yet to treat members of one race differently than you treat members of another—and not because you secretly or "implicitly" think that members of different races deserve different kinds of treatment, but rather merely because you have, as a member of a culture in which members of different races are differently stereotyped, acquired patterns of thinking and reacting to others that are, unfortunately (even by your own lights), sensitive to the color of their skin.

17. So there is nothing in these examples, taken on their own, that speaks against the view that judging that *p* entails believing that *p*. The examples speak against this view only against the background of certain assumptions about the role of belief and other mental states and events in the production of action. These assumptions are, on the face of it, deeply implausible. Defending them is therefore no trivial task.[10]

18. There is also positive reason to think that judging that *p does* entail believing that *p*. Importantly, the reasoning here depends on fairly minimal assumptions about the nature of judgment: all that is required is the assumption that judging that *p* involves taking it to be true that *p*. Thus, as Boyle puts it:

> the idea that I might judge that *p* without believing that *p* is hard to understand. For to say that I judge that *p* is presumably to say that I take *p* to be true. If I did not take *p* to be true, it is hard to see how any conscious thought I might think could constitute a judgment. For judging that *p* surely requires not merely affirming to myself that *p* (whatever that might mean) but affirming *p in the conviction that it is true*. (2009: 130, his emphasis)

[10] For more on the Process Theorist's examples, see Boyle 2009: 130–132.

Process Theorists do seem to accept the relevant claim about judgment. For example, Quassim Cassam, summarizing the account provided by Shah and Velleman (2005: 503), says that judgment is "a cognitive mental act, the act of occurrently putting a proposition forward in one's mind *as true*" (2010: 81–82, my emphasis). So how can he deny that judging entails believing? As Boyle notes (2009: 132), he might reply that a belief, unlike a judgment, must last for a certain amount of time. Something like this view might seem to be implicit in Shah and Velleman's discussion, in particular when they distinguish *acts* from *attitudes* and claim that belief is an attitude and judgment an act (2005: 503). But the reply is not terribly convincing. On the face of it, a detective might come to a conclusion concerning the identity of the killer as short an amount of time as you please before he acquires evidence that he was wrong and changes his mind. To say that, in that case, he never believed, but only judged, that the killer was so-and-so—because *he didn't have time* to believe—is, as Boyle says, merely *ad hoc*. Worse, it's not clear that it even makes sense: belief, on the Process Theorist's own view, is a state; and a state is not the kind of thing that *takes* time.[11] It doesn't take time for something to *be red*, for example (though it may take time for it to *become* red, as it does when you paint your walls). As a result, something can *be* red for an arbitrarily short (or, of course, long) amount of time. It is not clear why belief should be any different.

19. I conclude, then, that judging that *p* entails believing that *p*. And from this it follows that coming to believe is not a process.[12]

[11] For some discussion, see, for example, Steward 1997: 97–101.

[12] I will assume here that it also follows that the event of coming to believe that *p* is not an *effect* of the event of judging that *p*, although this assumption is controversial. In other words, I will assume that the arguments of the present section show that the Process Theorist cannot retreat to a view on which the event of judging that *p* is simultaneous with the event of coming to believe that *p*, which it causes. (Cf. note 7 above.) I have my doubts about these assumptions, but, in any case, my own reason for rejecting the Process Theory doesn't depend on them. My view is that there is a necessary (indeed, a conceptual) connection between judging and believing that the

IV The Activity Theory

20. These objections to the Process Theory provide an important piece of the motivation for the view of Matthew Boyle's mentioned in §I. In particular, Boyle takes these and related arguments to show that, "if we possess the capacity for doxastic self-determination, this capacity is *not* exercised in acts of changing our belief-state, installing new beliefs or modifying existing ones" (2011: 19, my emphasis). He thus locates exercises of our capacity for doxastic self-determination, not in acts of coming to believe, but in what he goes on to describe as the *activity* of believing, i.e., the state of "actively" *holding* a belief. Call this view *the Activity Theory*.[13]

21. Because the Activity Theory has been developed primarily in application to inferential beliefs, and because it is not entirely clear how to apply it to perceptual and testimonial beliefs (for example), I will restrict my attention to inferential beliefs.[14] For present purposes, then, I will take the Activity Theory to be the view that *believing something on the basis of something else you also believe* is an *activity*. This characterization is meant to capture Boyle's claim that "a rational subject's believing what she does is itself her enduring act of holding it true" (2011: 22). Just what it is for believing to be an activity, or an enduring act of holding true, will come out as we proceed.

22. Boyle (2011: 11–12) motivates the view that *believing something on the basis of something else you also believe* is an activity by comparing the following two explanations of belief:

(1) *S* believes that *p* because she believ*es* that *q*

Process Theorist is not in a position to explain. I discuss that connection, and explain the reasons it provides for doubting the Process Theory, in Koziolek manuscript(a).

[13]Activity Theorists include Boyle (2009, 2011), Jewell (2015), Marcus (2012: Chapter 2) and Rödl (2007: Chapter 3).

[14]For some discussion of the Activity Theory and perceptual belief, see Jewell 2015: §5.5.

(2) *S* believes that *p* because she believ*ed* that *q*.

According to Boyle, for *S* to believe that *p* on the basis of (her belief that) *q* is for (1) to be true. But, on the Process Theory, (1) is never true; the closest the Process Theorist can get to (1) is (2). So, if the Process Theory is right, it is impossible to believe something on the basis of something else you also believe. Instead, all that ever happens is that you believe something *now* because at some time in the past you believ*ed* something else.[15]

23. In other words, the Process Theorist is apparently forced to explain *S*'s belief that *p* in the following way. Initially, *S* believed that *q*. At some point, on the basis of reasoning from *q*, *S* judged that *p*. That judgment then caused her to form the belief that *p*, and she has retained that belief ever since. But it seems to be compatible with all of this that, at some point after she formed the belief that *p*, *S* abandoned or otherwise lost the belief that *q* and did so without abandoning or otherwise losing the belief that *p*. In that case, of course, it cannot be the case that she believes that *p* because she believ*es* that *q*—for she no longer believes that *q*. But the difference between the case in which she has lost the belief that *q* and the case in which she has retained it seems superficial. Everything pertaining to the relation between her belief that *p* and her belief that *q* is in the past, just as much in the case in which she has retained the belief that *q* as in the case in which she has lost it. So, if the best we can say in the case in which she has lost the belief that *q* is that she believes that *p* because she believ*ed* that *q*, then that is also the best we can say in the case in which she retains the belief that *q*. Or so Boyle suggests.

[15] Of course, a version of the Process Theory that allows causes to be simultaneous with their effects can escape the letter of this objection. But it still faces the problem that you will believe something on the basis of something else you believe only occasionally, and only for very short periods of time. And that view is hardly more plausible than the one Boyle is more directly attacking.

24. My interest here is less in this argument itself than in where it leads Boyle.[16] The important point is that, if we accept the argument, we seem to be forced to conclude that, if you believe something on the basis of something else you also believe, that fact must be grounded in the existence of a *present* relation between these two beliefs. Thus, according to Boyle:

> The relationship between [a subject's] belief and her sense of what there is reason to believe is brought to the forefront of her attention when she consciously considers whether *q*, but *it is present, not merely potentially but actually*, even when she does not reflect. (2011: 22, my emphasis)

It is this view that I have in mind when I say that *believing something on the basis of something else you also believe* is an activity. To say that something is an activity, in this sense, is to explain it as or by things you are *actually presently doing*, and not merely by reference to things you *can* or *could potentially* do. In particular, to say that you believe that *p* on the basis of *q* (which you also believe) is not to say merely that you believe both that *p* and that *q* and that your belief that *p* was formed or confirmed in inference from *q*. It is to say, rather, that there is an *actual present relation* between your belief that *p* and your belief that *q*.

25. The Activity Theory, in its more complete form, is essentially the generalization of this view about the relation between your belief and your reason for holding it. Because the relation between a grounding belief and a grounded belief is conceived as actually "present," both the grounding belief and the grounded belief—the terms of the relation—must themselves be conceived as actually "present." Thus, at least when they ground other beliefs, beliefs

[16] For the record, I don't find the argument persuasive: the final move—which rests on the assumption that, if the subject does not believe that *p* on the basis of *q* in the case in which she no longer believes that *q*, then she does not believe that *p* on the basis of *q* in the case in which she still believes that *q*—strikes me as fallacious. But I won't go into this issue here.

themselves are "present, not merely potentially but actually." It is this consequence of the Activity Theory that, I shall now argue, gives us reason to look for an alternative.

V Believing is a potentiality

26. Suppose that, on Monday, you make an appointment to meet with a colleague—let's call him Nathan—on Friday afternoon. On Friday morning, you wake up, happy that the weekend is nearly at hand, and go through your usual Friday routine: you shower, brush your teeth, make coffee, eat breakfast, and sit down at your computer to spend a few hours working on a paper. You become so deeply absorbed in your work, however, that you neglect even to break for lunch, and you continue working through the afternoon. When you finally quit—because, say, one of your cats has decided to demand your attention by pacing back and forth across your desk, blocking your view of your work—it suddenly occurs to you: you were supposed to meet with Nathan this afternoon! So, moving the cat to the floor, you write a brief but apologetic email to Nathan, asking if you can reschedule for Monday.

27. Examples like this one seem to show that it is possible to believe the premises of even the simplest deductively valid argument without believing the conclusion. In this example, on Friday at noon, you believe both that you need to meet with Nathan on Friday and that (as you would put it) today is Friday. But you don't yet believe that you need to meet with Nathan *today*. As it is sometimes put: although you believe the premises, you haven't yet "put them together," and *that* is why you don't yet believe the conclusion.

28. The possibility in question is nicely explained by dispositional theories of belief.[17] For the dispositionalist can say that your beliefs

[17] For a discussion that's especially relevant to the issues of the present section, see Audi 1994. But see also Schwitzgebel 2002 and 2013.

that today is Friday and that you need to meet with Nathan on Friday are dispositional states, and that what explains the fact that you don't yet believe that you need to meet with Nathan *today* is the fact that these two dispositions haven't been co-actualized. In particular, your belief that you need to meet with Nathan on Friday hasn't been actualized since (let's suppose) Wednesday, but has instead (so to speak) lain dormant. And what happens when it occurs to you that you were supposed to meet with Nathan today is that your belief that you need to meet with Nathan on Friday is finally actualized together with your belief that today is Friday. Admittedly, the dispositional theorist still owes us an explanation of the nature of the co-actualization of distinct dispositions (it's not obvious, in particular, that merely co-temporal actualization will do).[18] But it's at least reasonably clear what it means to say that your belief that you need to meet with Nathan on Friday isn't actualized on Friday until well after noon. And it's clear how this fact can figure in an explanation of the fact that, at noon, you don't yet believe that you need to meet with Nathan today, even though you believe both that today is Friday and that you need to meet with Nathan on Friday.

29. As I have characterized it, the Activity Theory is *not* a dispositional theory of belief: to say that the belief that *p* is an activity is to *deny* that it is a dispositional state. As Boyle puts it, in a passage I quoted in the last section: when you believe that *p* on the basis of *q* (which you also believe), your belief that *q* "is present, *not merely potentially* but actually" (2011: 22, my emphasis).[19] And that claim, Boyle suggests, generalizes to all of your beliefs. That is, *whenever*

[18] I sketch my own account of the co-actualization of beliefs in §VII. I explain how such co-actualization works in more detail, in the specific case of inference, in Koziolek manuscript(b).

[19] The criticism of Boyle that I voiced briefly in note 3 above could be defused, at just this point, if Boyle were to allow that the belief can be present *both* potentially *and* actually—that is, if he were to allow that, while the belief is actually present in one sense, it is, in another sense, present only potentially. This sort of distinction was drawn explicitly by medieval commentators on Aristotle, who distinguished first from second actuality, and allowed that first actualities are in a sense also potentialities (second, rather than first, potentialities, as it was usually put). In these

you believe that *p*, whether you have a specific ground for that belief or not, the belief is actually, and not merely potentially, "present."[20]

30. It is thus not clear how the Activity Theorist can explain the possibility of believing the premises of a very simple deductively valid argument without believing the conclusion. If, for example, your belief that today is Friday and your belief that you need to meet with Nathan on Friday are both "actually present," how can you fail to believe that you need to meet with Nathan today? What can it be for you to have failed to put those two beliefs together?

31. It may be that the Activity Theorist can find a way to answer these questions.[21] So I don't take these considerations to be decisive. I simply want to point out that the Activity Theorist has some explaining to do, and that this puts him at a disadvantage, relative to the dispositional theorist. For, as I will now explain, it is possible to construct a theory of believing and of coming to believe that avoids the pitfalls of the Process Theory without requiring us to reject the view that belief is a dispositional state—that is, without requiring us to say that believing is an activity.

terms, what I think Boyle ought to allow is that a belief is only a first actuality, and that it reaches second actuality only in (for example) acts of inferring in which it figures as either a premise or a conclusion. These ideas obviously require further development, but I'll need to leave that work for another occasion.

[20] Cf. Boyle 2011: 22.

[21] Most obviously, it might be suggested that to "put two beliefs together" is simultaneously to "bring them to consciousness." Since you can clearly fail to bring two beliefs to consciousness simultaneously, that would explain your failure to "put them together." I have no objection to this suggestion in principle, but I do think that we need an *account* of what it is to "bring a belief to consciousness." And my own view is that the best account of "bringing a belief to consciousness" is precisely the one I provide in §VII below. So there is, perhaps, a sense in which the view I propose there can be seen as providing precisely the solution the Activity Theorist needs. But, again (cf. notes 3 and 19 above), whether the Activity Theorist can adopt the view I propose depends on what he is and isn't willing to say about the relation between exercises of rational agency and actualizations of rational capacities.

VI Interlude

32. So here's where things stand. On the one hand, there is good reason to think that judging that *p* entails believing that *p*; and this view is incompatible with the Process Theorist's claim that coming to believe is a process, one in which, first, you judge that *p* (on the basis of an appropriate piece of reasoning) and then, second, your judging that *p* causes you to believe that *p*. What this suggests is that we need a view of coming to believe on which it is not a process. Admittedly, the Activity Theory does seem to provide such a thing: on the Activity Theory, coming to believe something (on the basis of something else you already believe) is nothing but the inception of the activity of believing it (on that basis). But, on the other hand, there is good reason to think that it is possible to believe the premises of even the simplest deductively valid argument without believing the conclusion; and this fact is at best left unexplained by the Activity Theorist's claim that believing is an activity, and may even be incompatible with it. What that suggests is that there may well be something amiss in the Activity Theorist's conception of belief. In any case, we so far seem to have just two options, neither of which is completely satisfactory.

33. There is, of course, some reason to prefer the Activity Theory to the Process Theory. For the Process Theory actually conflicts with things we have good reason to believe, while the Activity Theory only leaves them unexplained; and the lacuna in the Activity Theory can perhaps be filled. But because I am myself skeptical that the Activity Theorist can explain the possibility of believing the premises of a very simple deductively valid argument without believing the conclusion, I think it's important that there is another option here, that is, a way of avoiding the view that coming to believe is a process, but without moving to the view that believing is an activity. The key to seeing how is to notice that the view that belief is a dispositional state doesn't imply that coming to believe is a process. That is, what implies that coming to believe is a process is not the claim that

belief is a dispositional state, nor even the claim that belief is a dispositional state conjoined with the claim that coming to believe that *p* sometimes involves judging that *p*. The claim that coming to believe is a process follows, rather, only from the conjunction of all *three* claims mentioned in §II: that belief is a (dispositional) state; that coming to believe that *p* sometimes involves judging that *p*; and that you can judge that *p* without believing that *p*. We can, however, hold on to the first two of these claims while rejecting the third. In particular, we can say that (in at least some cases) coming to believe that *p* is an *act* that involves judging that *p*, where judging that *p* entails believing that *p*. My aim in the next (and final substantive) section, then, is to explain this view of coming to believe.

VII Belief as the disposition to judge

34. We can treat belief as a dispositional state, and also explain the fact that judging that *p* entails believing that *p*, by taking the view that *belief is the disposition to judge*. More precisely, we can define belief as follows:

> **Definition of belief:** To believe that *p* is to be disposed to judge that *p*.[22]

[22] Many dispositionalists about belief take the view that belief is a *multi-track* disposition. According to Eric Schwitzgebel (2002, 2013), for example, having a certain belief involves having certain behavioral, phenomenal, *and* cognitive dispositions—that is, dispositions to do certain things, "dispositions to have certain sorts of conscious experiences," and "dispositions to enter mental states that are not wholly characterizable phenomenally" (2002: 252). Indeed, he maintains that "[n]o one disposition is either necessary or sufficient for the possession of any belief" (2002: 252). The view I take in the text is meant as a rejection of this sort of view. In particular, I think that the view of belief as a multi-track disposition is based largely on a misconception of the act of judgment, and so an overly hasty rejection of the sort of view proposed in the text. What I say below is not meant as a complete remedy, however, but merely as a step in the direction of an attempt to correct that misconception. I hope to say more about multi-track dispositionalism on another occasion.

On this definition of belief, judging that *p* entails believing that *p* for the simple reason that you can't actualize a disposition unless you possess it.

35. Whether this definition is acceptable depends crucially, however, on the nature of both judgments and dispositions—or, more carefully, on the conceptions of them employed in the definition. For example, on the conception of judgments and dispositions employed by at least some of the philosophers I have identified as Process Theorists, the definition just proposed is not particularly plausible. As Cassam says:

> One can imagine someone who finds it psychologically impossible mentally to affirm to herself that *p* but who nevertheless believes that *p*. She has no disposition to judge that *p*, even when expicitly asked whether *p*, but she does in fact believe that *p*. (2010: 83)

On Cassam's view, again, judging is the mental act of putting a proposition forward in your mind as true. It is not entirely clear how he conceives of dispositions, but one thing he seems to assume is that, if *x* is disposed to ϕ, then it is *possible*—relative to appropriate parameters, e.g., *x*'s psychology—for *x* to ϕ. For, in the example, what shows that the person in question has no disposition to judge that *p* is that it is psychologically impossible for her to do so. With dispositions so understood, the view that to believe that *p* is to be disposed to judge that *p* is obviously incorrect. For you can clearly believe that *p* without being disposed, in this sense, to judge that *p* (*however* we conceive of judging, interestingly enough).

36. But Cassam's central assumption about the nature of dispositions—that, if *x* is disposed to ϕ, then it is possible for *x* to ϕ—is extremely dubious. The simplest way of bringing this out is to note that Cassam's assumption is incompatible with the possibility of *masked* dispositions, i.e., dispositions that cannot manifest because their manifestations are prevented by the manifestations of other

dispositions (and powers more generally) that are extrinsic to them—as in Mark Johnston's case of "a support which when placed inside [a] glass cup prevents deformation so that the glass would not break when struck[, where e]ven though the cup would not break if struck the cup is still fragile" (1992: 233). In other words, a thing can have the disposition to ϕ even if it is not the case that, were a triggering event to occur, the thing would ϕ. In fact, the occurrence of ϕing in response to a triggering event need not even be nomologically possible. The proper response to Cassam's objection, on the score of dispositions, is thus that whatever psychological mechanism it is that renders it psychologically impossible for the subject to judge that *p* does not annihilate but merely *masks* the disposition to judge that *p*. So the fact that the subject is psychologically incapable of judging that *p* does not imply that she does not have the disposition to judge that *p*.

37. It seems to me that, once we have allowed that dispositions to judge can be masked, Cassam's example provides no reason to doubt that belief is a disposition to judge, even on the conception of judgment on which it involves putting a proposition forward in your mind. But Cassam also mentions a second objection, one that would still apply even once we have allowed for the possibilty of masked dispositions:

> If some non-human animals are capable of belief but not judgment then that would be another reason not to regard the belief that *p* as a disposition to judge that *p*. (2010: 83)

This objection is relevant in the present context in part because it is plausible that only linguistic creatures can judge in the sense in which judging involves putting a proposition forward in your mind. After all, putting a proposition forward in your mind seems to require that you have a grasp of it, and, arguably, only linguistic creatures are capable of grasping propositions. So, in order to answer this objection, we seem to need some other conception of judgment. Of course, it would be possible to respond to this second

objection by denying that non-human animals even have beliefs. But I don't find that response particularly plausible. Instead, then, I want to make the opposite move: thus, I submit that, if belief is indeed a disposition to judge, that's because non-human animals—i.e., non-linguistic creatures—are capable of judgment as well as belief.

38. It's helpful, in latching onto the conception of judgment I have in mind here (which, again, doesn't involve "putting a proposition forward in your mind," whatever exactly that amounts to), to note that, if belief is the disposition to judge, then judgment is the *actualization* of belief. Thus, if we think of an unactualized belief as one that (as I put it earlier) "lies dormant," then a judgment is simply a belief that is, as it were, "awake." Or, to employ a different metaphor: a judgment is a belief that is "at work". And we can see what it is for a belief to be "awake" or "at work" by considering, once again, the sort of example I gave in §V, of your forgetting about a meeting you'd scheduled with your colleague, Nathan. In that example, at noon, you believe both that today is Friday and that you need to meet with Nathan on Friday, but you don't believe that you need to meet with Nathan today. And the reason you don't yet have that last belief is that one of your premise-beliefs—that you need to meet with Nathan on Friday—has lain dormant since Wednesday. What happens when you finally realize that you were supposed to meet with Nathan *this afternoon*, we can now say, is that your beliefs that today is Friday and that you need(ed) to meet with Nathan on Friday both "awaken" at once—they are (to mix the metaphors a bit) simultaneously "put to work"—at which point you come to believe, i.e., you infer, that you needed to meet with Nathan *today*.

39. Thus, on the conception of judgment I mean to be employing in the above definition of belief, the inference in which you realize that you needed to meet with Nathan today—the act in which you first (finally) draw that conclusion—involves the co-judgment of your premises. In that act, you simultaneously judge both that today is Friday and that you need(ed) to meet with Nathan on Friday. More

generally, then: inferring *p* from *q* and *r* involves simultaneously judging both that *q* and that *r*. Or, better (and, on my view, more accurately): inferring involves the *co-actualization* of the beliefs that *q* and that *r*.

40. Finally, when you infer that you needed to meet with Nathan today, you judge not only your premises, but also your conclusion. In other words, an inference can be described as an act of *judging* something on the basis of something else (some other things) you also *judge*. What this means, however, is simply that the conclusion-belief, too, is "awake," or actualized. (The metaphor of being "at work" doesn't work so well in the case of the conclusion-belief, but that shouldn't spoil the point.) So we can, if we want, redescribe the act of inferring as an act of *coming to believe* something on the basis of something else (some other things) you already believe. In fact, if belief is defined as the disposition to judge, these two characterizations of the act of inferring are definitionally equivalent.

41. Importantly, this conception of judgment extends beyond the case of inference, though with important differences. The only dispositions (the only powers) that are actualized in inference are beliefs. Acts of coming to believe on the basis of perception, on the other hand, also involve actualizations of perceptual capacities (perceptual powers). But even such perceptual acts involve actualizations of *some* beliefs. For one thing, the perception that *p* involves the actualization of the belief that *p*, i.e., the judgment that *p*. But it also involves the actualization of what epistemologists often call *background beliefs*. Thus, if I see that the wall I'm looking at is light blue (and not white), that act of seeing involves not only the actualization of my perceptual capacities (the wall's *looking* blue to me), but also the actualization of my background belief that lighting conditions are normal.

42. We can thus, finally, describe the *act*—not the process—of coming to believe in the following way: coming to believe is an act

in which you judge something on the basis of the actualizations of certain other capacities, e.g., other beliefs (as in the case of inference) or other beliefs plus some perceptual capacities (as in the case of perception).

43. There is, I acknowledge, much more that needs to be said about the nature of these acts of coming to believe (or, as I prefer to call them, *epistemic acts*), in particular about the capacities actualized in perceptual and other acts of coming to believe and about the notion of co-actualization. My considered view, however, is that nothing much can be said about these issues in general—essentially, nothing more than what I have said here. To go further, we need to consider the nature of the various kinds of acts in all their glorious detail.[23] More specifically, we need to consider the nature of these acts—acts of coming to believe, epistemic acts—as potentially *knowledge-producing*. For it is only by seeing them as potentially knowledge-producing that we can see their unity. But those are stories I must leave for another day. The point for now is just that, on the present conception of acts of coming to believe, it is possible to acknowledge the apparent rational relevance of *past* acts to *present* beliefs—past acts, that is, of inferring, perceiving, and so on—but *without* accepting the view that coming to believe is a process. To avoid the Process Theory, we don't need to accept the Activity Theory.

VIII Conclusion

44. On the view I have proposed here, versions of the first two of the three claims that motivated the Process Theory turn out to be true. For, first, belief is a state, while judgment is an act. More specifically, belief is a dispositional state, and judgment is its

[23] For an account of inference that aligns with the view developed here, see Koziolek manuscript(b). And for a discussion of perception that fits quite well with the approach I have taken here, and the approach I take in my paper on inference, see Marmodoro 2014 (to which I am, incidentally, very much indebted).

actualization. Second, coming to believe that *p* at least sometimes involves judging that *p*. In fact, on the account I have proposed, coming to believe that *p* will *always* involve judging that *p*, so long as the formation of the belief in question is more than minimally rational.[24] Coming to believe is *not*, however, a process. It is, instead, an *act*. It is the act of judging something on the basis of other things you also judge, and sometimes also the actualizations of other capacities (for example perceptual capacities). And that act does not merely *cause* you to believe that *p*; rather, it *is* your coming to believe that *p*.[25]

References

Audi, Robert. 1994. Dispositional beliefs and dispositions to believe. *Noûs* 28(4), 419–434.

Boyle, Matthew. 2009. Active belief. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary Volume 35, 119–47.

— 2011. 'Making up your mind' and the activity of reason. *Philosophers' Imprint* 11(17).

Broome, John. 2013. *Rationality Through Reasoning*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Cassam, Quassim. 2010. Judging, believing, and thinking. *Philosophical Issues* 20, 80–95.

Freud, Sigmund. 1931. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Ed. and trans. by James Strachey. Second Edition. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1962.

[24] The exceptions are cases of the sort I discuss in note 1 above, cases in which, as I have put it, the belief is *only* "minimally rational."

[25] Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the University of Chicago, Northwestern University, and the University of Potsdam. I am grateful to audiences at each of these talks for their helpful feedback. I am also or especially grateful to the following people: Amos Browne, Jeremy Fix, Till Hoeppner, Dhananjay Jagganathan, and Joshua Mendelsohn.

Jewell, Andrew. 2015. *Believing for Reasons*. PhD Thesis, UCLA.

Johnston, Mark. 1992. How to speak of the colors. *Philosophical Studies* 68, 221–263.

Koziolek, Nicholas. manuscript(a). Belief, judgment, and rational explanation.
— manuscript(b). Inferring as a way of knowing.

Mandelbaum, Eric. 2016. Attitude, inference, association: on the propositional structure of implicit bias. *Noûs* 50(3), 629–658.

Marcus, Eric. 2012. *Rational Causation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Marmodoro, Anna. 2014. *Aristotle on Perceiving Objects*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McHugh, Conor. 2011. Judging as a non-voluntary action. *Philosophical Studies* 152, 245–269.
— 2013. Epistemic responsibility and doxastic agency. *Philosophical Issues* 23, 132–157.

Nottelmann, Nikolaj, ed. 2013. *New Essays on Belief*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Peacocke, Christopher. 1998. Conscious attitudes, attention, and self-knowledge. In *Knowing Our Own Minds*. Ed. by C. Wright, B. Smith, and C. Macdonald. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Rödl, Sebastian. 2007. *Self-Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Schwitzgebel, Eric. 2002. A phenomenal, dispositional account of belief. *Noûs* 36, 249–275.
— 2013. A dispositional approach to attitudes: thinking outside of the belief box. In Nottelmann 2013, 75–99.

Shah, Nishi and J. David Velleman. 2005. Doxastic deliberation. *The Philosophical Review* 114(4), 497–534.

Shoemaker, Sydney. 2009. Self-intimation and second order belief. *Erkenntnis* 71, 35–51.

Steward, Helen. 1997. *The Ontology of Mind: Events, Processes, and States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Toribio, Josefa. 2011. What we do when we judge. *Dialectica* 65(3), 345–367.