**An Anscombean account of doxastic agency**

Some philosophers have recently suggested that belief is a somehow active phenomenon. For example, Matt Boyle writes that someone’s “believing something on a certain basis is itself an active condi­tion, the [Aristotelian] *energeia* of an active capacity to determine what he believes by assessing grounds for holding a given belief”(Boyle 2011, 21). And he suggests that “our discretion over our own beliefs is not extrinsic but *intrinsic*. On this view, we exercise our capacity for cognitive self-determination, not primarily in doing things that affect our beliefs, but in *holding* whatever beliefs we hold” (Boyle 2009, 127). Similarly, Pamela Hieronymi distinguishes between what she calls “managerial” and “evaluative” control over beliefs. Evaluative control is possible because “certain attitudes [such as beliefs] embody one’s answer to a question or set of questions“, and therefore, “one can exercise control or agency over such attitudes by coming to or revising one’s answers to the relevant question(s)“ (Hieronymi 2009, ???). It is for this reason that evaluative control “deserves to be thought of as a form of agency” (Hieronymi 2009, ???). Similar ideas have been voiced by Christine Korsgaard, Richard Moran and Angela Smith, among others.[[1]](#footnote-1) They all share the thought that believing something is in some sense active, an exercise of agency.

This thought strikes me as at once intuitively right and attractive, and as deeply puzzling and hard to comprehend philosophically. One puzzle it raises is how to conceive of this agency if, as everyone agrees, it is different from the kind of agency we are familiar with from the paradigm of agency, namely intentional action. Of course, the philosophers I have mentioned have done brilliant work to make the thought intelligible, and made interesting suggestions as to how exactly to spell it out. But their proposals seem to raise many puzzles of their own. Laying out and discussing these puzzles would be a lengthy business, which I will save for another occasion. What I want to do here instead is lay out a proposal of my own for how we can understand belief as an agentive phenomenon while keeping its difference from voluntary and intentional action in clear view. I will draw on the analysis of the grammar of intentional action which G.E.M. Anscombe offers in her book *Intention* – a text that plays a prominent dialectical role in both Boyle’s and Hieronymi’s accounts –, and try to uncover a structurally similar yet in important respects different grammar in believing. My idea will be this: an intentional action is whatever gets described using the grammar of intentional action, i.e. whatever gets described in the grammatical structures Anscombe analysed. If talk about believing exhibits a similar yet in some respects different structure, we can assume that believing is active or an action because of these similarities, but not an intentional action because of the differences. In other words, the fact that both grammars have certain structural features in common underlies the fact that both intentional action and believing are agentive phenomena, whereas the fact that both grammars differ in crucial respects means that the agency that is expressed in believing is different from intentional agency.

I will proceed as follows: After clarifying my talk about grammar and grammatical structures and their relation to what these structures capture or express in section 1, I will review some salient points of Anscombe’s analysis of intentional action in section 2, and sketch an analogous analysis for belief in section 3. I will draw a brief conclusion in section 4.

1. Essence is expressed by grammar

Before I present my main argument, I should perhaps begin by clarifying some methodological assumptions underlying my account. Following Anscombe and Wittgenstein, I assume here that the “nature” or “essence” of things is expressed in the linguistic structures we employ to talk about them. Wittgenstein puts this thought succinctly when he says: “Essence is expressed by grammar” (Wittgenstein 1953, §371), and “Grammar tells what kind of object anything is” (Wittgenstein 1953, §373). According to Anscombe, Wittgenstein’s claim generalizes an insight that was already implicit in Gottlob Frege’s explanation of numerical functions:[[2]](#footnote-2)

“Frege proceeds to remind us of, to draw out attention to, the fact that ‘2 x 1(3) + 1’, ‘2 x 2(3) + 2’, ‘2 x 4(3) + 4’ are all of the same pattern; they stand for different numbers – but if ‘2 x x(3) + x’ were also an arithmetical expression it would also indicate a number, though only in an indeterminate way. The point is that in the use of such an expression as ‘2 x x(3) + x’, we get an expression of something quite different from a number. It isn’t that the letter ‘x’ couldn’t have been a numeral – it is the mode of use that shows that it is not a numeral but is used to form the expression of a function. The difference of mode of use is the difference in the grammar of use of letters ‘x’, ‘y’, etc., and the grammar of signs which constitutes their being numerals: a grammar that expresses the essence: natural number. (Anscombe 2015a, 210)

What Frege explains is a grammatical difference between numbers and numerical functions. He doesn’t try to give definitions that state their different essences, but instead describes the different ways in which we use their symbolic representations. Wittgenstein suggests that quite generally, when we want to talk about what something is, we should not try to give a definition that grasps some feature or set of features which are inherent in this thing and make it the kind of thing it is, but we should rather attend to the grammar, and thus to the modes of use, of the expressions which we use to talk about that thing. Here is how Anscombe describes this change of perspective for the case of our colour concepts:

“Wittgenstein appears to suggest that what ‘corresponds to’ our concept of colour is not (as we might have wished to say) a distinct feature of things, but rather the ‘very general fact of nature’ that colour and shape are independent. This suggestion […] does head one off from an attempt to concentrate on and state the essence that the grammar expresses. A scholastic statement about colour, for example, was that it was ‘whole in the whole, and whole in every part’. This would appear in Wittgenstein as, say: ‘We call something dividing up a square, for example, but nothing dividing up its colour.’ Or: ‘Nothing is called a part of red, which appears in one place and is not red, while another part, also not red, appears in another place, so that the two together are said to make up the red.’ And these are grammatical remarks, remarks about the way in which words are used.” (Anscombe 1981, 113)

The lesson applies quite broadly: “That essence is expressed in grammar […] is also fairly clear in most cases of familiar concepts of substances and kinds of stuff. Examples: animal, plant, peacock, man, flea, bougainvillea, banana-tree. Also: acid, wood, metal, milk.” (Anscombe 2015b, 216-217) Some of the words in Anscombe’s list are count nouns, others are mass nouns. To this linguistic distinction corresponds the ontological distinction between individual substances like fleas or peacocks, which get their criteria of identity from their species membership, and stuff like milk or wood, for which there is no ready-made criterion of individual identity, which therefore needs to be explicitly added in a given context (e.g. *a glass* or *a bottle of* milk). Moreover, nouns that name species differ from names for individuals. When we count the animals in a room in which there are three people and five fleas, we will count two if what we pick out are animal species, whereas we will count eight if we want to pick out individual animals, or five if what we want to know is the number of individual fleas, or three if what we are interested in is individual humans. The different types we count here (animal species, individual animals, individual fleas or humans) are tied to different criteria of identity, and thus to different patterns of sameness and difference in space and over time. “’The persistence of a certain pattern in a flow of matter’ comes into our account; but the notion of a pattern, as of a shape, is here special. We readily speak of the shape of a horse or human being, but we don’t say that someone’s shape alters when he sits down. Ad the term ‘pattern’ extends to covering ‘patterns’ of development over a period of life involving considerable changes, even like those from caterpillar or larva to pupa to butterfly.” (Anscombe 2015b, 217) Anscombe’s point is that different patterns of sameness are associated with different forms of linguistic expression, and these in turn hang together with various linguistic and non-linguistic actions, like counting, or re-identifying a given individual on different occasions.

What Wittgenstein and Anscombe reach for could be called a *philosophical* grammar. Is it different from the kind of grammar people get taught at school, or read about in grammar books for Latin, French or English? According to Anscombe, there is no difference in principle here. “[I]t is only that ‘grammar-school’ grammar is very narrow and thin and doesn’t cover, doesn’t take note of, a lot of differences. Question: is ‘three’ an adjective in ‘Three men went out to mow a meadow’? Ordinary school grammar isn’t equipped to consider the question.” (Anscombe 2015a, 210) So there is a continuity between the kind of grammar that is being taught at schools and philosophical grammar, but the latter covers more differences than the former. The need for these further distinctions arises when we realize that certain narrow or thin grammatical categories, like that of an adjective, don’t quite fit certain cases, like Anscombe’s example of the three men, and thus are prone to generate grammatical misunderstandings that appear as philosophical confusions. And what about the relation of philosophical grammar to the sophisticated descriptions of grammatical structure we find in modern linguistics? I assume that again, we find some continuity here. But there may also be difference that come from the different aims of both enterprises. Linguistic grammar is in part driven by ideals of theoretical unity and simplicity that need not be relevant to philosophical grammar. At least for Wittgenstein, the latter has to remain a more piece-meal affair that develops local distinctions for specific philosophical purposes without aiming for their integration into some overarching grammatical theory for a language.

If essences are expressed in grammar, and if grammar is tied to a human practice that could in principle be changed, does that mean that these essences are arbitrary creations of the human mind? Anscombe answers this question by pointing out that “if we change grammar in some ways, we shall change the essences that are expressed in it: I mean that we shall make it express – if it does express anything – different essences. Some essences are indeed productions of human intelligence: thus Wittgenstein says that mathematicians produce essences. In natural philosophy (which we nowadays call ‘science’) there is sometimes a production of essences, like, for example, the essence expressed in the grammar of the term ‘element’. But mostly essences are not human inventions.” (Anscombe 2015a, 210-1) Mathematicians invent language games, such as that of complex numbers or of algebraic functions, which they endow with a certain grammar, and they thereby create mathematical essences. Similarly, scientists invent practices of describing certain stuff as composed out of simple elements, which involves for example techniques for isolating pure samples of these elements. By endowing these practices with a certain grammar, they thereby create essences for these elements. However, it should be clear that all of this is far from arbitrary. The underlying practices serve certain purposes, and therefore need to be designed in such a way that these purposes are met. Mathematical or scientific constructions and conceptual innovations usually arise from certain theoretical problems that arise within mathematics or the sciences, and are worthless unless they properly answer to these problems.[[3]](#footnote-3)

If “essence is expressed in grammar” in something like the way Wittgenstein and Anscombe suggest, then the essence of agency or activity will arise from certain grammatical features of the language we use to think and talk about agentive phenomena. This is perhaps most clearly the case in intentional action, where our agentive involvement in them will be expressed in the grammar of the language we use to describe intentional actions. If belief is another agentive or active phenomenon, as I am assuming here, our agentive involvement in believing will likewise be encapsulated in the grammar of the language we use to describe believings. It seems fair to assume that what I have here called agentive involvement is roughly similar in both cases. So we should expect that in both cases, roughly similar grammatical structures give rise to this phenomenon intentional action and belief have in common. In order to identify what agentive involvement is, we should thus examine the grammars we use to think and talk about intentional action and belief, with a view to identifying some important structural aspects that they share. We can assume that these common structural aspects express something like an essence of its own, a generic essence, if you will, and that this generic essence is the essence of agency *sans phrase*. To be sure, the agency of intentional agency differs in important ways from the agency involved in believing. On the present methodological assumptions, these differences will likewise arise from structural grammatical features which intentional action and believing do not have in common. These differences in their grammars will give rise to the specific differences of the species intentional agency and doxastic agency.

In the next two sections, I will first review some salient claims of Anscombe’s account of the grammar of intention and intentional action, as laid out in her book *Intention*, and then examine where the grammar of belief exhibits similar structural aspects, and where it differs from the grammar of intentional action. This will allow us to identify those grammatical features that underlie the essence of agency *sans phrase*, and to see more clearly where intentional agency differs from doxastic agency.

2. Anscombe on the grammar of intentional action

Anscombe lays out the grammatical profile of intentional action by introducing and explaining the following points: (a) intentional action is subject to a specific sort of why-question, (b) we have practical knowledge of what we do intentionally, (c) actions are intentional under a description, and these descriptions enter into a teleological or instrumental order – the A-D order Anscombe describes, (d) practical knowledge is the cause of what it understands, (e) practical reasoning concludes in action, and its order is a mirror-image of the A-D order of intentional action descriptions.

(a) According to Anscombe, intentional actions are subject to a specific kind of why-question, one that inquires after practical reasons. Whenever someone does F intentionally, we can ask her why she is doing F. As a question that seeks to uncover practical reasons, this why-question contrasts with other sorts of why-question. For example, we may ask why the sum of a triangle’s internal angles equals 180 degrees. An answer to that question will give a geometrical proof. Or we may ask why a bridge collapsed in a storm. In order to answer this question, we will have to identify the causes of the collapse. So one way to isolate the specific sense of our why-question is to identify the kinds of answers that respond to it. This is what Anscombe does. According to her, our question allows for three kinds of answers. First, a forward-looking answer may describe a further objective which the action in question aims to promote. For example, you may say that you are crossing the street because you are heading for the train station. Second, a backward-looking answer may describe some aspect of the situation one finds oneself in, and to which one’s action responds. For instance, you may say that you are stopping your car because the traffic lights turned red. Third, an interpretive answer may invoke a pattern, like a character trait or an emotion, which your action exemplifies. For example, you may say that you are helping someone out of love or pity. In all three cases, you give positive reasons for what you are doing.

Anscombe mentions in passing that one need not have positive reasons in order to do something intentionally. One can act for no particular reason, as when one idly doodles in a boring committee meeting. Here, the why-question still “has application”, as Anscombe puts it. That is to say, someone giving that answer accepts the question as valid, and thereby accepts that what she is doing is an intentional action, but points out that it was neither motivated by a further objective, nor seen as an adequate response to the situation, nor the expression of a character trait or emotion. One just did the thing, and that’s all there is to it. This is possible, but, as Anscombe observes, such cases are in a sense parasitic on those other cases where some positive answer is given. If “no reason” were the *only* answer one could give, the question wouldn’t make sense.[[4]](#footnote-4) So the answer “for no particular reason” can only be given on some occasions, and it presupposes that a positive answer out of the range I described above can be given on other occasions.

For Anscombe, the first answer, which invokes a further objective, has some priority over the others. It as it were defines the intentional as such. Again, that means that the other answers only make sense if this first answer is also possible. Accordingly, Anscombe focuses on the first sort of answer to her why-question and lays the other possibilities aside.

(b) Anscombe thinks that we can answer why-questions of the relevant kind by drawing on what she calls *practical knowledge*. When we act intentionally, we know what we are doing and why we are doing it. Moreover, we have such knowledge without having to invoke epistemic intermediaries like observation, inference or testimony. In other words, when we are asked a why-question of the relevant sort, we can answer it without having to find out about the answer. We know what we are doing and why by being engaged in the intentional action about which we have the knowledge. Practical knowledge is thus not something over and above the intentional action, some optional feature that may or may not be added to it, but an integral part of the action itself. Practical knowledge in part *constitutes* intentional action. I will return to and elaborate on this thought below, under (e).

(c) Actions are intentional “under a description”, as Anscombe puts it. In other words, intentional action is a description-dependent, or intensional, phenomenon. One and the same behaviour may be intentional under some descriptions, but not under others. For example, I may raise my hand and thereby greet a friend who has just entered the room intentionally, but I may also, by raising my hand, unintentionally enter a bid at the auction that is being held in that room. Under the description “greeting my friend”, my raising of my hand is intentional, whereas under the description “making a bid”, it is unintentional. The descriptions under which actions are intentional have a specific grammatical form: they involve verbs for intentional actions. Some such verbs wear their intentionally agentive character on their sleeves, and can only be used to describe intentional actions; e.g. “making a bid”, “signing a contract”, “telling someone” or “greeting”. Others verbs are ambiguous, and can be used to describe intentional actions, but also to describe mere behaviour; e.g. “sliding”, “breaking something”, “intruding” or “stumbling over something” (compare the list on p.85 of *Intention*). Still other verbs are such that they cannot meaningfully enter into action descriptions at all; e.g. “digesting”, “growing up” or “cracking up”.

If one answers an agentive why-question by giving a further objective, the question can be reiterated, by directing it at this new action description. Consider the following dialogue: Why are you crossing the street? – I am heading for the train station. – Why are you heading for the train station? – I am trying to catch the 15:08 train to Hereford. – Why are you trying to catch that train? – I am … . About each new objective, it can be asked whether it serves another, ulterior purpose. What is thus revealed is a nested order of intentional action descriptions. If we label the action descriptions in the order of the alphabet, we can call it, with Anscombe, the A-D order. This order expresses the teleological or instrumental structure of the intentional action in question. What comes earlier in that order is a means that serves the ends that come later in the order. Conversely, later items in the order articulate the aims or objectives that are to be realized by the former items. Practical knowledge is first and foremost knowledge of such an order of action descriptions, and thus knowledge of the intentional structure of the action itself.

(d) Anscombe not only held that all intentional action involves practical knowledge. She also claimed, following Thomas Aquinas, that “practical knowledge is ‘the cause of what it understands’, unlike ‘speculative’ knowledge, which ‘is derived from the objects known’” (Anscombe 1957, 87, quoting Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, Q3, art.5, obj.1). Speculative knowledge is derived from its object in the sense that it is secondary to and independent of the facts known. When I know speculatively that, say, there’s a Walnut tree in my garden, the fact exists prior to my knowledge of it. I need to establish that knowledge through perception, testimony or inference that in one way or another link me to that fact itself. Also, in such a case the fact exists independently of my knowledge. Even if I (or anyone else) were ignorant of the fact, there would still be a Walnut tree in my garden. My knowledge does not cause or constitute that fact.

It is different with practical knowledge. Here, the knowledge is prior to the object known, and it causes this object. Practical knowledge’s priority comes to the following. When I know practically what I am doing and why, my action does not exist prior to my knowledge of it. That is why, as J. David Velleman reminds us, my action grinds to a halt once I lose my grip on what I am doing or why I am doing it.[[5]](#footnote-5) And that is also why practical knowledge is “knowledge without observation”, as Anscombe puts it. I need no perception or other epistemic intermediaries, such as testimony or inference, in order to learn about my action. As Anscombe points out, practical knowledge is the cause of what it understands in the following sense:

“This means more than that practical knowledge is observed to be a necessary condition of the production of various results; or that an idea of doing such-and-such in such-and-such ways is such a condition. It means that without it what happens does not come under the description – execution of intentions – whose characteristics we have been investigating.” (Anscombe 1957, 87-88)

Practical knowledge is thus the formal cause of the action that is known practically.[[6]](#footnote-6) It is what gives an intentional action its character as an intentional action. Moreover, it bestows on the action its characteristic means-end structure and makes it fall under those descriptions under which it is intentional. For example, my practical knowledge that I am moving my arm in order to operate a pump handle in order to refill the water tank of my house turns the up-and-down movement of my arm into an intentional action of operating a pump and of refilling a cistern – as opposed to, say, an action of taking some exercise. And it thereby makes my arm movement an intentional action, as opposed to, for instance, a voluntary though pointless movement of my arm, or a severe bout of Tourette’s syndrome.

Anscombe prefaces this point about formal causation by pointing out that her claim that practical knowledge is the cause of what it understands means *more* than that the presence of such knowledge is a necessary condition for the successful execution of an intention. This suggests that in her opinion it means that, too, but more besides. In other words, practical knowledge also plays *some* efficient causal role. Perhaps most obviously, I normally wouldn’t succeed in my action if I didn’t know what I am doing and why I am doing it, because this knowledge helps me in successfully supervising the performance of my action. In Anscombe’s view, however, this is not the only and not the chief causal role of practical knowledge.

(e) Anscombe held that we cannot understand practical knowledge unless we understand *practical reasoning*. She did not explain why, but part of her point surely was that practical reasoning has the same structure or order, only in reverse, as the order of action explanation that is revealed by a repeated application of her why-question. Another part of her point was, perhaps, that practical reasoning is a conceptually central way of committing to intention and intentional action. As Anscombe says, with Aristotle, the conclusion of a practical inference is the action itself. Practical reasoning is thus a conceptually central way of determining ourselves to intend and to act intentionally. I say “conceptually central” in order to leave room for unpremeditated, spontaneous actions that nevertheless are being done for reasons. Such actions surely exist, but they are conceptually (even though perhaps not statistically!) marginal in the sense that there would not be actions of this type if there were not also actions of the reasoned type. Spontaneous intentional actions can only be performed by creatures who possess and on occasion exercise the ability to reason practically.

On Anscombe’s view, practical reasoning has a characteristic structure: the first premise articulates an objective or aim, something the agent wishes to obtain or realize. The second premise states ways or means for obtaining or realizing that thing. And the conclusion consists in the action itself. Practical reasoning thus proceeds from ends to means – and ultimately to means one adopts in performing an intentional action one can immediately do. The order of practical reasoning is therefore a mirror image of the A-D order of action descriptions revealed by Anscombe’s why-question.

3. The grammar of believing

What we are interested in is the agency we exercise with respect to our beliefs. My thought is that belief itself is an agentive phenomenon, and that the agency it involves is expressed in the grammar we use to describe beliefs. If this is correct, we should expect to find that the grammar of belief is structured in a similar way to the grammar of intentional action. This suggestion will be borne out if we find counterparts to the grammatical features (a)-(g) which I described in the previous section. And I think this is indeed the case: (a) belief is subject to a specific sort of why-question, (b) we have self-conscious knowledge of what we believe, (c) the content of our beliefs is description-dependent, and these descriptions enter into a nested order of justifications, (d) doxastic self-knowledge is the cause of what it understands, (e) theoretical reasoning concludes in belief, and its order is a mirror-image of the order of justification revealed by the why-question.

(a) Similar to intentional actions, beliefs are open to a specific sort of why-question. Whenever someone believes that p, we can ask her why she thinks that p.[[7]](#footnote-7) However, unlike the why-question that inquires after practical reasons, the why-question that can be addressed to believers asks for epistemic reasons, i.e. for reasons that offer an epistemic justification. The question why one believes that p is thus equivalent to the question of what indicates that p is true. When a believer answers the question, she will lay out the reasons that in her eyes speak for the truth of p, and thus make it seem right to her to think that p.

Again, a whole range of answers is possible here. First, the believer may offer an answer that refers to her sense-perception: she believes that p because she has e.g. seen, felt, smelt or otherwise experienced that p. Second, she may offer an argument that justifies her belief through other beliefs she holds. In other words, in response to the why-question, she may present an inference which concludes in the content of her belief. Third, she may hold the belief on the strength of testimony, and respond to the why-question by pointing out that she heard from someone that p. Of course, in many cases, a believer’s epistemic reasons may be a mix of these different possibilities.

Is any of these options for answering the doxastic why-question conceptually (as opposed to, say, statistically) privileged, in the sense that the question only makes sense if this answer is available, and otherwise disappears? A good candidate for such a privileged type of answer is inference, for arguably, the default way of saying why one believes that p is by laying out an argument that shows why p is true. Moreover, if we try to imagine a language game in which the only answer to the why-question available to us were a reference to some perception, it is hard to see how the belief so justified would differ from an articulation of the perception itself. Such a distance requires some epistemic evaluation of the perceptual evidence, and this takes the form of a reasoned argument. So it seems that inference as a possible answer has to be in the picture if the question is to make sense at all.

With intentional action, we saw that someone can do something intentionally without having a particular reason for doing it. Is something similar possible with belief? Can one just believe that p, without having any reason for that belief? This is a difficult question. Consider first a sense in which believing “for no particular reason” is *not* possible in the same way that acting intentionally for no particular reason *is* possible. We often choose among options of roughly equal quality, where we have to pick any one of them, but do not have any reasons for picking one in particular and exclude all others. If we had to have a reason for preferring one of the options in order to decide which one to take, we would be stuck, as Buridan’s ass is between two qualitatively similar stacks of hay. But, first, we are rationally allowed and, second, unlike the ass, we are also able to arbitrarily pick one of the options here, and if we do, we won’t do so for a reason, but “just so”. Now, consider a parallel situation for belief. If we find ourselves in a situation where we have roughly equally good evidence for believing that p and for believing that not-p, we are not allowed to plump for either believing the one or the other. We have to suspend judgement. So a situation where we believe that p for no particular reason because we had equally strong reason for believing that p and believing that not-p cannot arise.

But there is another consideration that suggests that there actually *are* beliefs we hold for no reasons, namely the role which Wittgensteinian “hinge propositions” play in our epistemology. As Wittgenstein points out, some of our believings are groundless because they are the bedrock of our justifications and function in our epistemic economy as ungrounded grounds.[[8]](#footnote-8) If you ask me why I believe that the world is older than five minutes, or why I think that the sun will rise tomorrow, I am at a loss to give you adequate reason. To be sure, I may be able to come up with some argument that concludes in these contents. But the premises of these arguments will presumably be less certain than the truth of these contents, and therefore not much use in actually underpinning my beliefs. The arguments will be more like post hoc-rationalizations than like actual grounds on which hold these beliefs. So here, I will have to say that I hold these beliefs, but have no reason for holding them. Importantly, with respect to these beliefs, the why-question still has application. It makes sense to ask why someone holds such a belief. It is just that the believer will not be able to give a positive answer to the question. All she can do is point to the special role the belief plays in her belief system.

So there are Wiitgensteinian reasons to think that there actually are beliefs which we hold for no reason. Notice that, just with intentional action, this does not show that it doesn’t make sense to ask the question why we hold such beliefs. It is just that there is no positive answer to that question. Moreover, *some* answer besides “for no particular reason” must be available if the why-question is to make sense. Just as the question “how many keys are in your pocket?” allows for the answer “none”, but presupposes that on other occasions it might be, say, “two” or “five”, the question “why do you think that p?”, although it makes room for the answer “for no reason”, presupposes that there are occasions on which the answer is “because ….”, followed by one of the three kinds of answer outlined above. Just as the question about keys doesn’t make sense if there never are any keys in pockets, the question about reasons doesn’t make sense if there never are any reasons for beliefs.

Are the three options for giving a positive answer to the why-question that can be raised about beliefs – perception, inference and testimony – the only possibilities? In other words, are epistemic reasons the only legitimate reasons for holding a belief? Or can beliefs be held for other, e.g. pragmatic reasons? This question raises the difficult topic of motives for belief. On the one hand, it seems perfectly possible to explain someone’s belief by referring to some motive. For instance, someone may believe they are a stable genius because they want to feel superior to others and the belief helps them to sustain that feeling. Now, even if this is possible, and a motive can be given as an answer to the question why someone believes that p, it seems equally plain that this answer has a different flavour from the one’s we laid out previously. After all, the motive doesn’t show that p is true, but only makes psychologically intelligible why the person holds that belief. In other words, the answer gives an explanation, but not a justification of the belief. And it is therefore possible, but something of a change of topic.

(b) Just as intentional agents have practical knowledge of what they do and why they do it, believers have epistemically unmediated self-knowledge of what they believe and why they believe it. When one believes that p, one usually knows straight off that one believes that p and why one believes it. One usually knows not only the content of one’s belief and that one holds this content true, but also the reasons for which one holds it true. And believers have such doxastic self-knowledge, as I will call it, not through epistemic intermediaries like observation or testimony or inference, but simply by holding the belief. I need not check, or ask someone, in order to know what I believe, and why I think so. I simply know in virtue of having the belief. Moreover, this self-knowledge is not an optional feature that may or may not be concomitant with believing, but is an integral part of believing. Epistemic self-knowledge thus in part *constitutes* our beliefs.

This claim needs to be qualified in various respects. First, I said that self-knowledge is *usually* a constitutive ingredient in believing something. But there are surely beliefs of which we are not aware – “unconscious” beliefs such as those that underlie implicit biases or irrational fears. I don’t want to deny this, but I can’t here give the problem the in-depth treatment that it deserves. A brief sketch must suffice.

According to a first response, my claim is meant to hold only for paradigmatic belief.[[9]](#footnote-9) It is only beliefs in the best and fullest sense that are self-conscious. Other, non-paradigmatic beliefs may exist, but for them, the claim need not hold because they are not beliefs in the best and fullest sense. Unconscious beliefs are among such non-paradigmatic beliefs. I am not quite satisfied with this first response. For one thing, it is unclear how paradigmatic and non-paradigmatic beliefs are related to one another. If they are deeply different, why do we call both beliefs? And if they have something substantial in common, why doesn’t this common factor extend to epistemic self-knowledge, if such knowledge is, as I claim, a constitutive part of paradigmatic belief? Another problem is that epistemic self-knowledge seems to be something of a norm even for non-paradigmatic beliefs. For example, some branches of psychotherapy aim at uncovering a patient’s awareness of their unconscious beliefs, thinking that this improves the patient’s psychic health and restores a proper epistemic self-relation. But why is this so, if unconscious beliefs are simply a special, non-paradigmatic kind of belief that are not to be confused with the paradigmatic ones?

I think the first line of response has difficulties in answering these questions. I therefore prefer a second line of response, according to which even unconscious beliefs involve self-knowledge, but in a way that is temporarily closed off to the believer.[[10]](#footnote-10) After all, unconscious beliefs still influence our decisions, actions and reactions, and they couldn’t do so if we were entirely unaware of them. For instance, my unconscious belief that I brought about my mother’s depression must, in order to make me feel guilty toward her, engage my emotions in a way that it arguably couldn’t do without some measure of awareness of that belief. More clearly perhaps, repression and self-deception require some incipient or opaque awareness of the belief that is being repressed or which we deceive ourselves about. If I deceive myself about the fact that my partner is having an affair with her colleague, my suppression of evidence for the fact, say, or my accepting her obvious lies about how she spends her afternoons, could not be explained unless I were to some degree aware of the fact that she is having an affair, and also aware of that awareness.

Even if we accept this much, there’s another reason to be sceptical about the claim that all belief involves doxastic self-knowledge. It concerns the second part of the claim, that believers usually know why they hold a given belief. This seems implausible. Consider, for example, beliefs for which we have forgotten the actual grounds on which we once adopted them, and only retain some memory of the fact that there *were* such grounds. Here we are unable to give the evidential reason which underpin the belief, although we retain some confidence that there are such reasons. Similarly, with those beliefs which we hold on the strength of testimony, we cannot ourselves give the expert’s or witness’s grounds for holding the belief. Instead, we rely on their word for the truth of what they tell us. Moreover, we sometimes have beliefs which we hold irrationally, with only feeble or no evidential grounds at all. Consider, for example, cases of wishful thinking or self-deceit, where the evidential grounds on which rely in holding them are distorted by some motivating force within us. Don’t these examples show that we do *not* normally know *why* we hold a belief?

Let us examine cases of forgotten evidence and testimony first. I think it is fair to say that in both cases, evidential reasons are still in the picture, even though the believer is not at present able to recall them, or lay them out in response to the doxastic why-question. These reasons *were* available the believer when he adopted his belief, and they *were* available to the witness or expert when she gave her testimony. Apparently, we can later still rely on these reasons even though we can no longer lay them out in response to the why-question. However, what we can do in response to such a question even later is point out that there were such reasons. They are thus in some sense available to us, if only obliquely.

With respect to cases of irrationality, it might help to point out that even here, we can give evidential reasons in response to the why-question. It’s just that these reason do not suffice to justify the belief, and we ourselves are in some sense aware of the fact. So in our own eyes, the reasons available to us do not suffice to ground the belief. What nevertheless makes us cling to it is some other psychological factor besides the reasons we see for the belief. At this point, we should note that Anscombe’s claim about intentional action, on which I model my account of belief, is not that we invariably and immediately know why we act intentionally in the sense of knowing some psychological mechanism or other that makes us do these things. Her claim is rather that in acting intentionally, we have available those grounds of our action that in our own eyes makes it seem good or feasible to act in that way. Similarly, our claim about belief should just be that we have available those reasons for belief which make the belief’s content seem true to us. And those reasons are available to us in cases of wishful thinking or self-deceit – even though the view of our reasons we take here falls short of full rationality.

(c) Let us no turn to the intensionality of belief, i.e. the fact that states of affairs are believed under a description. What I have in mind here is that the content of beliefs is articulated by propositions which register not just Fregean references, but Fregean senses. One can, for instance, believe that a is F, but nor believe that b is F, although a and b are in fact identical, as long as one remains ignorant of that identity, or fails to properly integrate one’s knowledge of it. Frege’s example of someone believing that the morning star has risen, but not believing that the evening star has risen, is a case in point. One and the same fact – the appearance of the planet Venus in the sky at dawn – can thus be believed under one description, but not under another. Belief is in this sense, just like intentional action, description dependent.

The nested A-D order of intentional action description which Anscombe highlighted has a counterpart in belief, too. Here it consists in a nested order of inferential justifications. When I answer a why-question about a belief I hold by giving an argument that is supposed to show the truth of the belief’s content, for each of the argument’s premises the why-question can again be asked. For example: I think the streets are wet. – Why do you think that? – Because it rained all night and the rain only stopped 5 minutes ago. Where that is the case, the streets usually remain wet for a while. – Why do you think that it stopped raining only 5 minutes ago? – Because… Such iterations often fairly quickly terminate in a reference to some piece of perceptual evidence or to someone’s testimony. But they can also go on for a while, and they may terminate in a Wittgensteinian hinge proposition for which no further evidence can be given.

(d) We can also transpose Anscombe’s point about practical knowledge as the cause of what it understands to belief. On my Anscombean view of believing, doxastic self-knowledge of what I believe and why I believe it is the cause of its object, i.e. of that believing. Again, this means first and foremost that my knowledge of what I believe and why I believe it is the formal cause of that believing. On the one hand, my believing is individuated by my awareness of what I believe and for what reasons I believe it. That I believe that p, instead of q or r, is due to the fact that I know myself to believe that p. Consider again the point I made above about the description-dependence of the contents of belief. What commits us to a belief under one description of the relevant state of affairs, but not under another is precisely the conception of it which we entertain in our doxastic self-knowledge. On the other hand, that what I do is believing and not, say, guessing is also due to my awareness of my believing. In particular, it can be ascribed to the justification that I know to back up my believing and that, in my view, reveals the believing’s content to be true. Besides this formal causal role, my awareness of what I believe and why also plays an efficient causal role. I believe *because* I am aware of the reasons that speak in favour of its content’s truth. Once I lose this awareness, i.e. my sense of why my believing is true, I will no longer believe the content to be true.

(e) As with practical knowledge and practical reasoning, on my Anscombean view of believing, we cannot understand our doxastic self-knowledge without having a clear view of theoretical reasoning. The reason is that the grounds from which we reason theoretically towards a believing are a mirror image of the grounds that are revealed by an Anscombean why-question as it applies to beliefs. Thus, when we answer such a why-question, we reveal the reasoning that led us to form or retain the believing under scrutiny.

Of course, as we have already seen, many evidential reasons for belief do not readily conform to this model. Reasons for belief include perceptions or testimony, and these seem to work non-inferentially. For instance, I can believe that the house is on fire on the ground that I see or smell that it is, but also on the ground that a reliable witness has told me that it is. But my seeing or smelling, and my being told, are not premises of inferences from which I conclude that the house is on fire. However, perceptual and testimonial grounds, although not themselves the content of inferences, are nevertheless formally of the right kind to ground beliefs inferentially. By this I mean that one *could* ground one’s beliefs on these contents inferentially. This shows up in the fact that we display these grounds in quasi-syllogistic fashion when we answer an Anscombean why-question. Moreover, as I pointed out above, among ways of grounding a belief, inference is conceptually central in the sense that justification through perception or testimony presupposes the possibility of justifying a belief through inference. Creatures without reasoning abilities would perhaps be able to perceive and to react to symbolic gestures. But they would not be able to justify their beliefs through perception or testimony. They would, in other words, not be able to see their perceptions or the symbolic gestures of others as grounds for their own beliefs.

4. Conclusion

I have argued that our thought and talk about beliefs exhibits grammatical features that are analogous to those which Anscombe found in her examination of our thought and talk about intentional action. First, belief, like intentional action, is subject to a specific form of why-question that uncovers the reasons for which the agent acts and the believer believes. Second, we have doxastic self-knowledge of our beliefs, which is analogous to Anscombe’s practical knowledge. Third, belief, like intentional action, is description dependent, where the descriptions enter into a nested order of justification which is revealed by a repeated application of the why-question. Fourth, doxastic self-knowledge is the formal cause of our beliefs, as practical knowledge is the formal cause of our intentional action. And fifth, theoretical reasoning mirrors doxastic justification, and is a core way of committing to a belief, as practical reasoning mirrors practical justification, and is a core way of committing to an intentional action.

How do these Anscombean findings explain the *agency* in believing? I think that they reveal that a network of interconnected ideas – self-knowledge, formal causation, reasoning, justification and explanation – apply to believing in more or less the same way that they apply to intentional action. Now, it seems plausible that it is this network of ideas which explains the agency we enjoy with respect to our intentional actions. The network explains intuitions we have such as that we are actively engaged when we act intentionally, and that we have a say in what we do and why we do it. We are active insofar as we enjoy practical self-knowledge, would not act intentionally without such knowledge, and can commit to action by engaging our reasoning abilities. If a similar network of ideas applies to believing, this likewise explains our intuitions that we are active in believing something, and that we have discretion over what we believe.[[11]](#footnote-11) At the same time, the grammatical structures we have uncovered are meaningfully different in both cases – there are important differences in the range of answers we can give to the relevant why questions, and doxastic self-knowledge differs from practical knowledge and theoretical reasoning from practical reasoning. This differences vindicate, I think, our intuition that intentional action and believing are different kinds of things. This result is just what we expected: intentional and doxastic agency are both species of agency, yet they work out differently in the domains of intentional action and of belief.[[12]](#footnote-12)

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1. Compare Korsgaard 2009, Moran 2012 and Smith 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also Anscombe 1981, 112-117; 1995; 2015a, 209-211; and 2015b for her explanations of Wittgenstein’s notion. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Some essences are created… rules, rights, promises [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Anscombe 1957, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Velleman 1989, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Compare Moran 2004 and Hursthouse 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See also Boyle 2009, 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Compare Wittgenstein 1969. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For this line of response, compare Marcus 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Compare Boyle 2011, 229-230. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Boyle 2009, 143, makes essentially the same point. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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