

Discussion Notes on Rettler's Active Reflection

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Received: 12 October 2023 / Revised: 31 October 2023 / Accepted: 2 November 2023

Abstract: According to Rettler, there are three types of control that we should consider in relation to the legitimacy of doxastic blame: Intention-based, reason-based, and influence-based control. Rettler argues that among these, influence-based control is the only type of control that is necessary and sufficient for fulfilling the control condition required for legitimate doxastic blame. The aim of this short discussion paper is to critically assess Rettler's view of doxastic control. By doing so, I attempt to defend the reason-responsiveness view from Rettler's criticism and cast doubt on whether influence-based control has a positive epistemic influence on beliefs.


Keywords: Lindsay Rettler; doxastic blame; ethics of belief; reason-responsiveness.

1. Introduction

Lindsay Rettler (2018) argues that blame imposed on our beliefs can be legitimate by refuting the following argument, what she calls the *anti-blame argument* (Rettler 2018, 2206):

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- (P1) If agents are legitimately subject to blame for their beliefs, they have control over their beliefs.
- (P2) However, agents have no control over their beliefs.
- (C) Therefore, agents are not legitimately subject to blame for their beliefs.

One issue of the anti-blame argument is that the meaning of “control” is difficult to pin down. To avoid this difficulty and also to deny (P2) in the argument, Rettler divides control into three types: intention-based, reason-based, and influence-based control. Specifically, Rettler argues that we have influence-based control and that this type of control is both sufficient and necessary for fulfilling the *control condition* for legitimate doxastic blame, which is a requirement for holding oneself or others responsible for their beliefs legitimately.¹ Consequently, she concludes that (P2) is false.² Furthermore, she maintains that intention-based control is sufficient but not necessary to satisfy the control condition, while reason-based control is necessary but not sufficient to satisfy it.

This short discussion paper aims to show that Rettler’s claims on reason-based control and influence-based control, as presented in her 2018 paper, are not convincing. To show this, the paper is structured as follows: In Sect. 2, I introduce the three types of control proposed by Rettler. Then, in Sect. 3, I evaluate Rettler’s claim that reason-based control cannot suffice to fulfill the control condition for legitimate doxastic blame. Finally, in Sect. 4, I investigate whether influence-based control is sufficient for legitimate doxastic blame, and whether it has a positive epistemic effect on beliefs.

¹ According to Rettler (2018, 2207), there are other requirements for legitimate blame, such as the attribution condition, the value condition, or the epistemic condition. However, following Rettler (2018) I will focus in this paper on the issue of which control can fulfill the control condition for legitimate doxastic blame.

² Note that some philosophers like Feldman (2000) denies the first premise in the anti-blame argument.

2. Overview of Rettler's three types of control

In this section, I will briefly outline the three types of control suggested by Rettler and introduce her core ideas on them.

To begin with, Rettler (2018, 2211) defines (direct) intention-based control as follows: "An agent has direct intention-based control over ϕ -ing just in case she can ϕ directly as the result of an intention to ϕ ." This kind of control is the one that we have over our actions. Surely, I can raise my hands as the result of an intention to do so. However, as Williams (1973) and Alston (1985) point out, we do not have this kind of control over our beliefs.

Rettler agrees that we do not have intention-based control over our beliefs but further argues that this kind of control, even if we had it, cannot be necessary for fulfilling the control condition. To be specific, she points out that there are many cases in which we can legitimately blame ourselves or others for something, even if we or they don't have intention-based control over it. For example, having an unhealthy body or an inconsiderate characteristic is neither a state nor a tendency that can be attained instantly as a direct result of intentional action. Nevertheless, it seems that we can legitimately blame someone for their unhealthy state under the assumption that there is a legitimate reason. Thus, Rettler concludes that having intention-based control is not a necessary condition for legitimate doxastic blame.

The second type of control that Rettler considers is based on the reason-responsiveness view, so it would be better to first briefly introduce the key idea of this view. The key idea lies in the observation of Ryan (2003) and Steup (2008) that both figuring out what to do and what to believe are based on reasons. The difference between our actions and beliefs is merely that we act based on practical reasons, whereas we form and hold beliefs based on epistemic reasons.³ Thus, according to this view, the reason why we cannot, for example, believe that the Earth is flat by executing our intention to believe it is simply because we do not have a proper reason for holding such a belief: If we had a proper reason, then we would have been

³ This claim is challenged by pragmatism. See McCormick (2014) and Rinard (2018).

able to believe it. That is, the reason-responsiveness view posits that we have the capacity for forming beliefs in a way that responds properly to reasons. Rettler calls this capacity *reason-based control*.

At first glance, it seems that reason-based control helps explain why some of our practices involving doxastic blame are legitimate. This is because an agent's capacity to properly respond to reasons means that they can hold beliefs that are likely to be true. Thus, if an agent adheres to false beliefs even though they possess the capacity to properly respond to reasons, they may be considered blameworthy or accountable for their false beliefs.

However, Rettler argues that having the capacity for responding to reasons (i.e., having reason-based control) is necessary but not sufficient for fulfilling the control condition required for legitimate doxastic blame. Rettler writes:

To be able to actively reflect, one must be able to respond to reasons—in the form of both sensitivity to reasons and sensitivity to appreciation of reasons. However, such responsiveness is insufficient on its own to constitute the control required for legitimate doxastic blame. In order to satisfy the control condition, one must additionally be able to execute intentions to carry out the mental actions that constitute reflection. What helps explain the legitimacy of doxastic blame is not our ability to respond to reasons *per se*, but rather our ability to perform mental actions that influence the process of responding to reasons. These actions make a difference to whether we believe a proposition. Therefore, it would be misleading to characterize our doxastic control as responsiveness to reasons. We ought instead to characterize it in terms of our capacity for active reflection (Rettler, 2018, 2216–17, *italics added*).

As the passage shows, Rettler believes that only the capacity for active reflection helps directly explain the legitimacy of doxastic blame. From her perspective, having the capacity to properly respond to reasons is a mere necessary condition for having the capacity to engage in active reflection, not sufficient for fulfilling the control condition. To argue for this, Rettler (2018: 2215) claims that the capacity for responding to reasons must be further specified into two types of reflection: active and passive reflection.

The distinctive difference between them, according to her, involves whether an agent intends to engage in reflection. Specifically, if reflection stems from a direct result of an intention, it is deemed active. Conversely, if reflection just manifests without any explicit intention, it is deemed passive.

Thus, according to Rettler, active reflection is a mental state that an individual can engage in as a result of an intention to do so, whereas passive reflection is a state that one might find themselves in, often regarded as involuntarily, due to unexpected thoughts and memories that suddenly pop up into their head. Since the notion of passive reflection is important for our discussion but might be unfamiliar, it would be worth looking at how Rettler describes it:

Consider what it would be for an agent to engage in passive reflection. Anyone who's ever tried to figure out a solution to a complicated problem has likely experienced finding themselves thinking about what they're going to eat for dinner that night...or wondering if they're going to hear back from that job interview two weeks ago...An agent engaged in reflection passively would be in a similar situation with respect to the various mental events that compose reflection...She would find herself wondering whether a certain reason supports believing a proposition, though she didn't intend to direct her attention there. She would suddenly remember a piece of evidence that she'd previously forgotten, and so forth (Rettler 2018, 2215–6).

Based on the above distinction, Rettler (2018, 2216) argues that we can imagine a person who can at best only passively engage in reflection despite having the ability to respond to reasons and, in this case, they cannot be legitimately blamed for their beliefs. (We will see about the reason for this in detail in Sect. 3.) This is why Rettler concludes that reason-based control is not sufficient to satisfy the control condition required for legitimate doxastic blame: reason-based control could involve only passive reflection.

By making the distinction between passive and active reflection explicit, Rettler suggests what she calls the reflective control view, which assumes that we have the capacity to engage in active reflection. The most distinct characteristic of the capacity for active reflection is that it is exhibited as a result of the intention to contemplate. Thus, when an agent performs active

reflection based on their intention, this can indirectly epistemically impact on their beliefs. In other words, the capacity for active reflection is a mental action that can indirectly affect our beliefs. Rettler calls this capacity influence-based control, arguing that it is both necessary and sufficient for satisfying the control condition required for legitimate doxastic blame.

3. Does responsibility always imply the execution of an intention?

As previously mentioned, Rettler claims that reason-based control is insufficient for legitimate doxastic blame. In this section, I will argue that Rettler fails to properly show that this claim is true. I will begin by mentioning the following theses that Rettler explicitly accepts:

- (1) Active reflection is the mental action of contemplating something through the execution of an intention, whereas passive reflection is not.
- (2) Active reflection is both necessary and sufficient for fulfilling the control condition required for legitimate doxastic blame.
- (3) Passive reflection is not sufficient for fulfilling the control condition required for legitimate doxastic blame.
- (4) Passive reflection is necessary but not sufficient for having the capacity to reflect actively.

Furthermore, it seems that Rettler also accepts the following, given that she rejects the reason-responsiveness view by contrasting active reflection with passive reflection:

- (5) Having the capacity to properly respond to reasons is sufficient for having the capacity for passive reflection.

All five of the theses mentioned can be controversial. Nevertheless, they clearly reflect Rettler's point of view, namely that an agent can be legitimately blamed only for their *intentional actions* (whether they involve physical movement or mental activity) that were carried out with full

awareness and control. This also explains why she does *not* count reason-based control, such as the capacity for passive reflection, as sufficient for fulfilling the control condition required for legitimate doxastic blame. The reason is that passive reflection is not a mental action that the agent can engage in by executing their intention. In other words, from Rettler's perspective, for an agent's actions, or beliefs to be legitimately subject to blame, they must be controllable at least indirectly via the execution of an intention.

For example, a person arriving late to an appointment can be legitimately subject to blame, even though the action of not arriving late to the appointment cannot be achieved based solely on the direct execution of an intention. This is because, as a result of executing an intention, the person could have performed actions, such as waking up earlier, that could have indirectly prevented her from arriving late to the appointment. Similarly, we can be legitimately blamed for holding incorrect beliefs because we have the capacity to engage in a mental action that may indirectly prevent us from holding such beliefs. This is reason why Rettler believes that influence-based control is the only kind of control that is necessary and sufficient for fulfilling the control condition required for legitimate doxastic blame.

However, doxastic compatibilists (e.g., Ryan (2003), Steup (2012), and McHugh (2014)) have refuted ideas similar to Rettler's on a few occasions. Specifically, Ryan (2003) distinguishes intending to φ from doing φ intentionally to argue that an agent who lacks direct control over their beliefs is still responsible for their beliefs. She writes:

I think consciously deciding to do x or explicitly intending to do x is sufficient, but not necessary, for doing x intentionally. Doing something purposefully is necessary for an action to be done intentionally. And, one can do something unconsciously, automatically, and purposefully (Ryan 2003, 70-71).

That is, according to Ryan, there are things that can be done intentionally without intending to do them.

What motivates Ryan's distinction? Doxastic compatibilists, including Ryan, share the fundamental premise of the reason-responsiveness view: there is no significant difference between action and belief in their nature. (This is why the reason-responsiveness view is regarded as a specific type

of doxastic compatibilism.) Thus, according to this view, most features attributed to action can also be attributed to belief. Ryan emphasizes that sometimes actions can be done intentionally without having an explicit intention to do so and tries to establish the same point for beliefs.

To be specific, consider, for instance, the action of shifting gears from P to D while driving. Such an action is often performed unconsciously without involving any explicit intention. Still, it seems reasonable to classify it as one carried out intentionally. After all, switching gears is not something that is done compulsively, but something that is typically done to achieve a specific goal. The same point can be applied to other actions, such as typing individual letters to compose a passage or brushing one's teeth.

Based on this point, Ryan (2003, 73–74) argues that although believing a specific content is not something we can do through the direct execution of an intention, it is still something we can do intentionally. From her perspective, this is because we have the epistemic purpose of forming (or holding) true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs and try to align our beliefs in line with this purpose. Thus, the epistemic purpose provides a reason to hold true beliefs, which explains why beliefs can typically be regarded as intentional: just as actions carried out for a specific purpose have a reason to be performed and thereby can be considered intentional, beliefs aligned with the epistemic goal can also be considered intentional. Consequently, according to Ryan, one can intentionally hold a belief even if there is no explicit intention behind it.

Note that if Ryan's point is correct, an agent may be held responsible for their beliefs, even if they have not actively reflected on them. This is because beliefs formed solely through passive reflection can still be considered intentional in that such reflection is grounded in an agent's epistemic reasons. Therefore, it could be argued that an agent can be held responsible for their beliefs even in the case where their beliefs were formed solely through passive reflection.

The key issue here does not lie in the truth of Ryan's point but rather lies in the incompleteness of Rettler's attempt to reject the reason-responsiveness view.⁴ Rettler argues that an agent who only has the capacity for

⁴ In fact, it is controversial whether doxastic compatibilism is tenable. See Nottelmann (2006), Peels (2014), and Booth (2014).

passive reflection and lacks the capacity for active reflection cannot be legitimately blamed for their beliefs. This is because, according to Rettler, passive reflection is not a mental action that can be executed by direct intention. However, Ryan contends that beliefs do not have to be held based on active reflection in order to be considered intentional, and thus can still be regarded as objects of responsibility without being linked to active reflection. Thus, for Rettler to convincingly refute the reason-responsiveness view, she must present an argument that undermines the claim that not only is active reflection intentional, but passive reflection is as well. However, Rettler does not provide such an argument, which leaves her criticism incomplete.

4. Problems with the reflective control view

4.1 Considerations from the Perspective of Empirical Studies

In the previous section, I argued that Rettler's criticism of the reason-responsiveness view is not conclusive. However, this does not guarantee the falsity of the reflective control view. Thus, in this section, I will argue that the reflective control view is not convincing.

The most serious problem with the reflective control view arises from Rettler's claim that influence-based control (i.e., having the capacity for active reflection) is *sufficient* for satisfying the control condition required for legitimate doxastic blame. This is because, in order to justify this claim, Rettler should show that the successful execution of the capacity for active reflection typically has a *positive* epistemic influence on beliefs. Without this, the argument that having influence-based control is sufficient for satisfying the control condition required for legitimate doxastic blame would be unconvincing. The problem is that as Kornblith (2012: 20-26) points out, there are several empirical studies that indicate that active reflection typically has negative effects on an agent's epistemic states (e.g., Garnham and Oakhill, 1994; Stanovich, 1999).

Rettler anticipated that the reflective control view may be criticized in this way. Thus, she suggests two reasons to argue that influence-based control is not the capacity that affects an agent's beliefs in every possible way,

but rather the one that affects an agent's beliefs in a positive way. The two reasons suggested by Rettler (2018, 2221) can be articulated as follows:

Reason 1: Just as there are several studies that show that active reflection typically has negative effects on an agent's epistemic states, there are also several studies that indicate that it typically has positive effects (e.g., Gagné and Smith (1962); DeWall, Baumeister, and Masicampo (2008); Small, Loewenstein, and Slovic (2007)).

Reason 2: Cases where an agent's active reflection has negative epistemic effects on their beliefs correspond exactly to cases where the agent is free from legitimate criticism of their beliefs.

However, from my perspective, the two reasons mentioned above fail to support Rettler's claim that active reflection typically has a positive epistemic influence on beliefs. First, (Reason 1) can, at best, only show that the empirical studies on active reflection cited by Kornblith are controversial. When empirical studies are contradictory on some issue, we should reserve our judgment on that issue until the supporters of one side win the argument.⁵ However, Rettler cannot simply reserve judgement on the effect of active reflection. The success of the reflective control view depends on whether the claim that active reflection has a positive epistemic effect on beliefs is true. Thus, (Reason 1) is not sufficient to support the reflective control view. At least, Rettler needs to show that certain aspects of the studies she cites can help refute the studies Kornblith (2012) mentions.

Second, with regard to (Reason 2), the example of cases in which Rettler thinks doxastic blame cannot be legitimately attributed to an agent is somewhat questionable. The example is as follows:

For example, suppose Kate incorrectly believes that Colgate is a more effective toothpaste than Crest, but unbeknownst to her she's influenced to believe this by the fact that Colgate toothpastes are located to the right of Crest ones in the shopping aisle.

⁵ Someone may argue that even when the empirical evidence is evenly balanced, other factors, such as common sense or inherent understanding, may come into play. I am not motivated to refute this, as it represents a case where one side prevail over the other.

Assume that if she were to reflect, she would not be able to identify this influence. In this case, it seems unintuitive to think that Kate is legitimately blameworthy for her belief (Rettler 2018, 2220).

Rettler's intuition regarding the above case is that it is not legitimate to attribute doxastic blame to Kate. However, why is such blame not legitimate? Rettler explains that the lack of legitimacy for such blame is due to Kate's inability to recognize her wrong belief that Colgate toothpaste is more efficient than Crest toothpaste, despite engaging in *active reflection*. More specifically, Rettler says the following:

Do we really think it's legitimate to blame someone for an incorrect psychological belief about their abilities if no amount of reflection could possibly dislodge that belief? I think not. In such a case, it's unfortunate that the person has an incorrect belief, but since she lacks the capacity for causally influential reflection, she cannot acknowledge that the belief is incorrect and thus that she should give it up. Given that she would not be able to respond to the demand inherent in the blame, it would not be legitimate to blame her for the belief (Rettler 2018, 2221, italics added).

Surely, based on the supposition, Kate cannot derive an epistemic benefit from the influence of active reflection in the above case. However, note that this alone does not allow us to conclude that it is not legitimate to blame Kate for her belief. To draw this conclusion, we need the additional premise that the reflective control view is true. This is because, contrary to what Rettler claims, there is an intuition that it is legitimate to attribute doxastic blame to Kate since her belief in question is objectively false.

Regarding this point, Rettler might argue that the mere fact that Kate holds a false belief does not suffice as a legitimate reason to blame her. As highlighted in the cited passage, Rettler believes that an agent must be able to respond to the inherent demands of blame to be legitimately held responsible for their belief. Thus, if we show that Kate has a form of control—distinct from influence-based control—over her beliefs that allows her to meet the demands of blame, it would suffice to refute the proposed objection.

Based on this motivation, I will briefly argue that the reason-responsiveness view can support the idea that Kate's belief can be legitimately blamed. Although Kate is in a state where active reflection cannot have a positive epistemic effect on her belief due to the current location of tooth-paste products, as long as she has the capacity for passive reflection (that is, if she can properly respond to epistemic reasons), she would be able to respond properly to doxastic blame if it were suggested.⁶ To be more specific, if someone blamed Kate for believing that a particular product is more efficient than another solely based on its location, she would be able to recognize that her belief was based on incorrect reasoning and would be able to try to modify it in response to such blame. Thus, Kate's expected response, contrary to Reltter's claim in the above passage, indicates that Kate has the ability to respond to the inherent demands of blame even if she is in a situation where active reflection cannot have a positive epistemic effect on her belief.

Consequently, cases where active reflection has a negative epistemic effect on beliefs do not match cases where an agent cannot be legitimately blamed for their beliefs. To argue that there is a connection between the former and latter cases, Rettler must presuppose that the reflective control view is true, which would beg the question.

In summary, the reasons suggested by Rettler do not support that the reflective control view is true. The first reason only indicates that the reflective control view is not entirely false. The second reason can be established only if the reflective control view is true and therefore cannot support the claim that the reflective control view is true.

4.2 Considerations from the Conceptual Perspective

As presented above, Rettler claims that active reflection has a positive epistemic influence on beliefs. In this section, I will argue that this claim can also be rejected without relying on empirical studies. To do so, I will

⁶ Someone might think that the effect of passive reflection seems dubious. However, it is Rettler who suggests the distinction between passive and active reflections. What I aim to show is that even if her distinction is valid, it does not necessarily follow that Kate is blameless.

begin by clarifying what exactly the phrase “have a positive epistemic influence” means.

One intuitive approach to interpreting this phrase is to connect it with our epistemic goal. It is widely held that our epistemic goal is to form true beliefs and avoid false beliefs. Thus, according to this approach, if Rettler's claim is true, active reflection can be understood as a mental action that enables us to form beliefs that are true and avoid beliefs that are false. However, it is not the case that active reflection can always lead to achieving this epistemic goal. For instance, imagine the inhabitants of a fictional island, say, Epistemia. In Epistemia, people hold deeply-rooted superstitious beliefs, such as the one that thunders occur because of God's anger. With no scientific resources available to disprove these beliefs, the Epistemians would fail to identify their false beliefs, even if they engaged hard in active reflection. This shows that active reflection may not be significantly helpful for an agent in achieving their epistemic goal, especially when the society or community to which they belong operates upon a significant number of false beliefs.

The lesson to be drawn from the above case is that, for an agent to experience a positive epistemic effect on their beliefs through active reflection, they must already have a significant number of true beliefs in their current belief system. I will call this necessary condition for having a positive epistemic effect from active reflection the *robust belief system condition*. Note that performing active reflection is irrelevant to satisfying the robust belief system condition. Rather satisfying a robust belief system condition relies on, for example, having a stable higher-order recognition state, such as accurately seeing and hearing, being sober, or being capable of various types of epistemic behaviors that allow an agent to gather additional evidence. Thus, if the phrase “have a positive epistemic influence” is interpreted in the manner described above, Rettler's claim will be false.

Rettler might object that I have interpreted the phrase “have a positive epistemic influence” too strongly. To be specific, she may appeal to Burge's explanation of (active) reflection to clarify the meaning of the phrase. According to Burge (1996), reflection is a mental action that can affect second-order beliefs when first-order beliefs are modified by changes in environment (or by additional information). Thus, Rettler could argue that active

reflection has a positive epistemic effect in the sense that it can rectify our second-order beliefs when our existing first-order beliefs turn out to be incorrect.

However, if active reflection has a positive epistemic effect on beliefs just in the sense described above, Rettler's claim that influence-based control is sufficient for fulfilling the control condition required for legitimate doxastic blame faces difficulties. To see this, consider the following case: Betty was trying to solve a difficult math problem, but she wasn't sure about a crucial principle needed to solve it. Instead of looking up the principle in a book (by using a library), she relied only on her reflection, even though she knew she might not remember it correctly. She submitted her answer and ultimately failed to solve the problem correctly.

In this case, it seems clear that we can hold Betty responsible for having failed to solve the math problem. However, note that we cannot blame Betty simply for not actively reflecting. In other words, the mere act of not actively reflecting about something is not enough to attribute blame to Betty. She did reflect on the content of the principle, and her reflection had a positive epistemic effect *in the sense* that if she had examined a book on mathematics in a library, she could have rectified her false beliefs on the math problem. Thus, the key to doxastic blaming Betty is that she had the ability to gather additional evidence, which could have satisfied the robust belief system condition, but she did not exert this ability. Consequently, if active reflection is interpreted in this rather weak sense, it will not be sufficient for fulfilling the control condition required for legitimate doxastic blame.

In summary, regardless of how we interpret active reflection, whether in terms of its contribution to our epistemic goal or its ability to derive true second-order beliefs, Rettler's claim about its positive influence faces challenges.

5. Conclusion

Rettler argues that reason-based control is insufficient for satisfying the control condition required for legitimate doxastic blame, and that only influence-based control is both a sufficient and necessary condition for

fulfilling it. However, her claim about reason-based control is not conclusive since she has not considered whether passive reflection is something we can do intentionally. Additionally, the reflective control view is not promising because the central claim that active reflection typically has a positive epistemic effect on beliefs is not well supported. Rettler not only has difficulties providing good reasons that can refute the empirical studies that threaten the central claim but also has difficulties embracing it under the two possible interpretations.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply thankful to an anonymous reviewer for their valuable comments and suggestions. Special appreciation goes to Inchul Yum whose detailed comments and suggestions resulted in many significant improvements in this paper.

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