

## *Argument*

Initial assumptions:

1. I exercised control over an action or the acquisition of a belief only if I performed this action or acquired this belief for a motivating reason;
2. The only form of control that we are able to exercise over belief acquisitions is indirect;
3. Among our motivating reasons for belief acquisitions, some of them are epistemic;
4. An epistemic motivating reason for acquiring a belief is a desire to acquire a *true* belief about a topic.

When a subject acquires a true belief as a result of his desire to acquire a true belief about a topic *by* modifying his pieces of evidence—for instance, when Bertie acquires a true belief about the spelling of the word “ornithorhynchus” by opening a dictionary as a result of his desire to acquire a true belief about this topic—, it is appropriate to say that Bertie exercises a form of indirect control over his acquisition of the belief that the word “ornithorhynchus” takes three “h”s. I shall call this form of control “theoretical control”.

As Alston notes (Alston 1988, 2006), there is a discrepancy between the theoretical control Bertie exercises when he acquires a belief by opening a dictionary and the control Amy exercises when she turns on the light in a room by flipping the switch. In the former case, the acquisition of the particular belief that  $p$  causally results from a desire to know whether  $p$  or not- $p$ . In the latter case, the performance of a particular action, the action of turning on the light in this room, and not in any other room, causally results from a particular desire to turn on the light in this room. According to Alston, such a discrepancy forbids us to conclude from the fact that Amy is responsible for her action of turning on the light that Bertie is *similarly* responsible for his belief acquisition.

First, I reply to Alston by providing an example in which

(i) it seems that the agent has control over the performance of his action and that he might be held responsible for it and; (ii) the form of control he exercises is strictly analogous to theoretical control.

Here I such an example:

Nestor is the manager of a building standing in the neighbourhood of an airport. Every evening, he is in charge of flipping a switch in order to turn on one of the

four neon signs located on the roof of this building. This is an action that Norbert performs every day, at nightfall, since it reduces the probability of accident when aircrafts are landing. The lighting system is conceived in such a way that it takes the orientation of the wind into account. When Nestor's action is, as a matter of fact, the action of turning on the east neon sign, it does not result from his desire to perform this particular action, but from his desire to turn on one of the neon signs whichever. The action of turning on the east neon sign is not performed under his control but the action of turning on one of the neon signs whichever is under his control. To be sure, in case of an accident due to Nestor's failure to switch on one of the neon sign, it seems inappropriate to excuse Nestor by claiming that he had no control of the turning on of the neon signs.

Second, I try to explain why we are prone to deny that a subject can have control over a determinable state of affairs such as:

1. The turning on one of the neon signs whichever (or over the making one of the neon signs be turned on);

Without having control over a determinate state of affairs such as:

2. The turning on of one particular neon sign (or of his making one particular neon sign be turned on).

The explanation why we are tempted to deny this probably lies in the natural propensity to apply the logical framework of the disjunction. But the only thing that the truth table of the disjunction teaches us is that when a subject  $S$  has control of  $[(Fa \cup Ga)$  being true], then, either  $(Fa)$  is true, or  $(Ga)$  is true or  $[(Fa) \cap (Ga)]$  is true. The truth table of the disjunction does not teach us that it is impossible for  $S$  to have control of  $a$  being  $F$  or  $G$  without having control of  $a$  being  $F$  or of  $a$  being  $G$ .

Finally, I apply this result to theoretical control and conclude that the following principle does *not* rule the ascription of theoretical control:

TC If a believer  $B$  has control of his acquiring a belief about the spelling of the word "ornithorhynchus", then  $B$  has control of his acquiring the belief that the word "ornithorhynchus" has three "h"s.

That is to say, when Bertie acquires the belief that the word "ornithorhynchus" has three "h"s as a result of his desire to acquire a true belief about this topic, the acquisition of a belief about this topic is under his theoretical control. But the acquisition of the belief that the word

“ornithorhynchus” has three “h”s is not something of which he has any control.

*References:*

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