**How Can Belief be Akratic?**

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*Abstract:*Akratic belief, or belief one believes one should not have, has often been thought to be impossible. I argue that the possibility of akratic belief should be accepted as a pre-theoretical datum. I distinguish intuitive, defensive, systematic, and diagnostic ways of arguing for this view, and offer an argument that combines them. After offering intuitive examples of akratic belief, I defend those examples against a common argument against the possibility of akratic belief, which I call the Nullification Argument. I then offer an Argument from Belief Attribution, using a discussion of the marks by which we typically attribute belief to defend attributions of akratic belief. I conclude by offering a way to explain what is puzzling about akratic belief, while allowing that it is possible.

*Keywords*: *akrasia*; belief; attribution; reasoning; irrationality

**I. The Puzzle**

An anorexic can know the evidence. He weighs less than almost everyone his height; he shows classic signs of malnutrition; he might even be a doctor himself, familiar with the warning signs of approaching starvation. His own doctor might convince him that he should not believe he is fat. And still he might not change his mind. He might even tell his friends: “I shouldn’t believe I’m fat, but I still believe it.” As he himself can recognize, his own constant attempts at weight loss, his insistence at mealtimes that he is horribly overweight, and his intense feelings of being overweight are signs that he does still believe he is fat.

This is only one especially troubling example of believing akratically, or believing what one believes one should not believe.[[1]](#footnote-1) A superstitious person can admit that she should not believe black cats bring bad luck. When her spouse is having an affair, a self-deceiver can come to recognize that, given the overwhelming evidence, she should stop believing that her spouse is faithful. Someone prone to the gambler’s fallacy can understand that, no matter how many times a fair coin comes up tails, past coin tosses have no effect on future ones, and she should not believe the next toss is likely to come up heads. But in all of these cases, a person can keep believing. She can tell people what she believes; she can feel conviction; and she can act on her beliefs—in these cases, by starving herself, avoiding black cats, trusting her spouse, and taking a 2:1 bet on heads. She can even offer apparent evidence or reasons for her beliefs. “Look at this fat,” she can say. “My friend had a black cat walk in front of her once…”; “She told me she would never be unfaithful”; “It’s been tails seven times!” In other contexts, some of us knowingly overrate our own abilities, or find ourselves unable to revise our beliefs in response to skeptical conclusions.[[2]](#footnote-2) Others believe that addressing climate change can be put off until later, while believing we should not believe it. Others cannot shake the belief that we are unlovable, or that people do not really like us, while recognizing compelling evidence to the contrary. The examples can be multiplied indefinitely. Just as we can eat dessert, or insult a friend, while believing we should not, we can have beliefs that we ourselves believe we should not have. It is one of the interesting characteristics of belief that it, too, can be akratic.

The possibility of intentionally *acting* as one believes one should not act is widely accepted.[[3]](#footnote-3) For the most part, it is accepted as a pre-theoretical datum: an intuitively recognizable phenomenon that a conception of action should be able to accommodate. An implication that akratic action is impossible is widely seen as a damaging consequence of any conception of action. It seems puzzling how anyone could think akratic action is *not* possible. Such optimism about the coherence of human activity seems myopic and extreme.

Skepticism about the possibility of akratic belief, on the other hand, is still relatively common.[[4]](#footnote-4) It is natural to ask: Are these really examples of akratic belief? How can we believe what we ourselves believe we should not believe? Can we? When we see that we should not have some belief, do we not avoid forming it, or give it up if we have it? Is that not how believing and changing one’s mind work? Belief in general can seem closely tied to the believer’s evaluation of what she should believe, in a way that rules out the possibility of akratic conflict. As Hurley (1989, p. 131) puts it, “the unavailability of the akratic structure is…constitutive of belief.” If this is right, all of the examples I described, and any others like them, *must* be understood in some other way: as temporary lapses in judgment, or compulsions, or recurring thoughts or feelings, rather than as beliefs the believer believes she should not have.

I believe that akratic belief is both possible and widespread—and nevertheless puzzling. How can our beliefs diverge so starkly from what we ourselves believe they should be? And the puzzle is itself puzzling. If belief *can* be akratic, why is akratic belief so puzzling that it strikes many of us as impossible?

One way to answer these questions would be to defend a theoretical conception of belief, and then show how that conception can account for *akrasia*. But any such line of defense ties itself to the success of a particular theory. I think the possibility of akratic belief should instead be treated like the possibility of akratic action often is. It should be seen as a puzzling but recognizable phenomenon with wide-ranging theoretical implications—a *pre-theoretical datum* which a conception of belief should be able to accommodate.

A defense of this view is difficult, since it cannot appeal to a theory about the nature of belief. It also leaves its conclusion open to later revision; a compelling enough theory may lead us to reject one initially compelling datum. Nevertheless, as with akratic action, there are various ways to argue that the possibility of akratic belief is a datum we should find difficult to reject. An *intuitive* argument, we can say, offers a range of recognizable or intuitively plausible examples. A *defensive* argument aims to undermine arguments against the possibility of akratic belief; we can call these “impossibility arguments” for short. A *systematic* argument appeals to a broader set of interconnected considerations about belief, still without appealing to a conception of the nature of belief. One such argument, which I will offer, might consider various common ways of attributing belief, and argue that they sometimes justify the attribution of akratic belief. A *diagnostic* argument aims to explain why akratic belief might seem puzzling and even impossible. Other kinds of argument may be possible as well.

The philosophical literature on akratic belief is gradually growing, but it is not yet very extensive. Treatments of the rationality or irrationality of akratic belief tend to assume its possibility.[[5]](#footnote-5) Other discussions include a small handful of impossibility arguments and some attempts to characterize akratic belief and explain how it is possible.[[6]](#footnote-6) I think none of these are fully satisfactory. The discussions of rationality leave aside a live debate about the very existence (and possibility) of the phenomenon at issue. The impossibility arguments tend to be derivative expressions of a more basic puzzlement, rather than justifications of it.[[7]](#footnote-7) The more constructive characterizations do not fully explain either how belief can be akratic, or why the phenomenon should be so puzzling. And they often assume that, to be akratic, a belief must be voluntary, intentional, or free.[[8]](#footnote-8) It is hard to accept that there are any such beliefs. And as we will see, there is no need to make the assumption. I think we need a treatment of akratic belief which does not require it to be voluntary, and which both addresses and explains our puzzlement about its possibility. There must be a way to make vivid, both how belief can be akratic, and why this possibility can seem so strange. A satisfying treatment of the possibility of akratic belief can in turn contribute to debates about its rationality. At a minimum, it lowers their risk of becoming moot by debating the rationality of a non-existent phenomenon. More positively, a better understanding of the possibility of akratic belief, and of our puzzlement about it, may also help determine whether and when *akrasia* can be rational.

What kind of argument could successfully show that akratic belief should be treated as a pre-theoretical datum? I think intuitive, defensive, systematic, and diagnostic arguments are most effective when they are combined—in this case, to show that there are intuitively plausible examples of akratic belief, not easily discounted, supported by more general considerations about belief attribution, and nevertheless understandably puzzling. In what follows, I offer a combined argument of this kind, with mutually supporting parts. I have already given an intuitive argument, by offering a range of examples.[[9]](#footnote-9) §2 is defensive, arguing that a common impossibility argument, which I call the Nullification Argument, is at most a question-begging expression of puzzlement about akratic belief. §§3-4 turn to more systematic considerations. In §3, I distinguish several characteristic marks by which belief is commonly attributed: sensitivity to evidence, recall in relevant circumstances, conviction, reporting or assertion, and use in further reasoning. I then argue that, in some cases, both component beliefs in an akratic state manifest these marks to an extent we normally recognize as belief, while nevertheless conflicting with and partly undermining each other. I call this the Argument from Belief Attribution, and I respond to objections to it in §4. §5 considers why akratic belief can seem puzzling and even impossible. These sections make intuitive (§1), defensive (§2), systematic (§§3-4), and diagnostic (§5) arguments for treating the possibility of akratic belief as a pre-theoretical datum.[[10]](#footnote-10) Together, they offer a way to illustrate, then resist, and then explain our natural puzzlement about how belief can be akratic.

**2. The Nullification Argument**

There is a perennially appealing line of thought that can lead us to doubt the possibility of akratic belief. Consider an example from Adler (2002a, p. 7), which we can call

*The Parking Lot*. If I pass my colleague David’s car in the parking lot of the local diner, I conclude that David is inside. But if, within minutes of the observation, I talk to another colleague on the phone, who mentions that David is in his office, then the evidence of seeing David’s car in the lot is nullified. Presuming that I have no reason to distrust the colleague, I infer that it was, e.g., David’s wife or son who drove his car to the diner. For if observing David’s car retains its original evidential force, then I cannot simply accept that he is in his office.[[11]](#footnote-11)

For Adler, conclusive evidence “nullifies,” or cancels, the apparent evidence for the contrary conclusion. It is tempting to draw a more general lesson, by a line of thought we can call

*The Nullification Argument*

(1) To believe that *p*, a person must believe she has reason to believe that *p*.

(2) When someone believes there is conclusive reason to believe *not p*, she cannot believe she has reason to believe that *p*.

(3) So, when someone believes there is conclusive reason to believe *not p*, she cannot believe that *p*.

The argument can be put in terms of evidence, or in terms of what one believes one should believe, rather than in terms of reasons. The crucial idea in the second premise would stay the same. Once we come to a belief about the reasons to believe *p*, countervailing reasons lose their force, and can have no further hold on us. Owens (2002, p. 390) writes: “No one can freely and deliberately form the belief that *p* when they think the evidence sufficient to establish its falsehood, because no one can judge that there is *any* reason to believe p in such a situation.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Or as Hurley (1989, pp. 131-2) puts it: the contrary evidence “has been subsumed without remainder. Less inclusive probabilistic evidence has no constitutive reason-giving force that could hold out in the face of recognition that it’s subsumed by the best probabilistic evidence, which favors the opposite conclusion.”

The argument is questionable in several ways. First, (1) can be doubted, and appears to give rise to an infinite regress: to believe that there is reason to believe that *p*, one must believe that there is reason to believe that there is reason to believe that *p*, and so on. Second, (2) assumes that it is impossible to have conflicting beliefs about what we have conclusive reason to believe. If this were not impossible, one could believe there is conclusive reason to believe not*-p*, and also believe there is conclusive reason to believe that *p*. The latter would be one way of believing there is reason to believe that *p*.Third, the argument as a whole applies to only one variety of akratic beliefs: those in which the person believes there is conclusive reason for believing not-*p*. Other akratic beliefs—about God, or abortion, or an upcoming election—might be akratic because we believe we should suspend belief, rather than hold an opposing view. Believing one should *not believe p* does not require belief that one should *believe not-p*.

With concerns like these in mind, it can be tempting to dismiss the Nullification Argument entirely.[[13]](#footnote-13) But I think it is worth pausing to dig deeper, to address the underlying source of the argument’s appeal. Understanding this appeal helps to illustrate the nature of our puzzlement about akratic belief. It also brings out a deeper problem with the argument. Even in cases of belief in conclusive reason against a belief, we can see the possibility of *akrasia*, in a way that sheds light on the other cases.

The Nullification Argument seems most convincing in cases of *knockdown* evidence—evidence that is both conclusive and especially obvious or impressive. *Seeing* David, or hearing from a reliable person who sees him, does seem to knock down, knock out, discredit, or nullify the apparent evidence to the contrary. But not all examples fit into this narrow range. Consider the gambler’s fallacy. If a series of random coin tosses includes several tails in a row, some people start to expect heads. There is no hope of vindicating this prediction beyond a 50% chance; past coin tosses have no effect on future ones. But as we see five, six, seven tails in a row, we can think: it’s *got* to be heads next time. If the coin is fair, there is no defensible position favoring heads that could take part in an ongoing rational controversy. The apparent reasons for expecting heads are merely apparent. And yet people who understand the gambler’s fallacy can be inclined to take a series of tails as reason to believe the next toss is more likely to come out heads. They can even be inclined to believe it for that reason. If the Nullification Argument tells us that, as Levy (2004, p. 152) puts it: “The apparent evidence against *p* is shown to be appearance only, and is therefore stripped of any persuasive force”—then the answer is that mere appearance can have persuasive force. For all we have seen so far, we might be able to acknowledge this force even when we commit to an opposing view.

Hurley’s statement of her view, quoted above, can be taken as an independent argument for premise (2) in the Nullification Argument. In her words, a parked car—a set of evidence that includes less—has been “subsumed” by the full set of evidence that includes the rest of what we know. The idea of “less inclusive” evidence being “subsumed without remainder” suggests that the evidence for a view is nullified *because* it has already been taken into account in the judgment in favor of the contrary conclusion. As Levy (2004, p. 151) puts the line of thought: “The evidence against…is exhausted: it is subsumed into our judgment. It therefore retains no further power to move us against our own best judgment. It is absorbed into the set of reasons which support that judgment.” According to this view, David’s car is already taken into account in judgment, and so cannot be brought into consideration in favor of the opposing view. If we rely on premise (1), we can then conclude that David cannot hold the opposing view, since he can see no reason in favor of it.

There are two ambiguities in this description of “subsumption.” First, is what is “subsumed” the *evidence—*whether thought of as a consideration, fact, or object—or its *force*? Second, is the “force” to be understood as normative, contributing to what we *should* believe, or persuasive, affecting what we *actually* believe? It is tempting to trade on the ambiguities, and say that the evidence loses its *force*, because the *evidence* has already been taken into account; the force can then be understood as persuasive force. Trading on the ambiguities in some such way is essential to Hurley’s claim of subsumption. When she says that “less inclusive probabilistic evidence has no constitutive reason-giving force,” this is relevant only if taking the evidence into account renders the evidence unpersuasive. But whether a piece of evidence we believe we should not find persuasive can nevertheless persuade us is at the heart of the issue. And it is not clear why taking a piece of evidence into account in forming one view should rob it of its persuasive force in supporting another. We can take into account a car, or a black cat, or the way we look in the mirror, and these might, for all we have seen, play the role of opposing evidence as well. There is so far still no argument that evidence cannot play these two roles. Most importantly, we have not seen why persuasive force should match what one believes it should be.

The Nullification Argument appears convincing only because we cannot yet see how we can believe something against our own view of what we should believe. It seems convincing, in other words, because *akrasia* is so puzzling. It is a dramatic but derivative expression of our puzzlement. The felt need to give rational expression to that puzzlement can lead us to appeal to some fairly unintuitive views, such as premises (1) and (2), in an attempt to generalize from examples such as The Parking Lot to the impossibility of all akratic belief. But as we have seen, it is hard to make a case for such a generalization without begging the question.

The premises do have some appeal. It can seem mysterious how the persuasive force of conclusive evidence could *not* be nullified. If someone reliable tells us David is in his office, how can we continue to treat his car as evidence that he is in the diner? But that appeal is limited. It can be answered by pointing to cases of inconclusive evidence, or by finding cases in which it might not be mysterious that the evidence remains persuasive. But more importantly, it can be answered without removing the sense of mystery. A mysterious murder is still a real murder. Strange as they may be, we have seen no reason to see the many apparent examples of akratic belief as any less real. The Nullification Argument certainly provides no such reason. It depends on, rather than supporting, a sense that believing against acknowledged conclusive reason is so mysterious that it must somehow be impossible.

By the same token, answering the argument does not remove the mystery. Raising these difficulties for the Nullification Argument can illustrate our underlying puzzlement about akratic belief. It may also weaken the impression that the puzzlement can be expressed by a compelling rationale for denying the possibility of akratic belief. But the difficulties do little to address the puzzlement itself. Those who are puzzled can still find it hard to imagine how belief can be akratic. To address the puzzlement, we need a recognizable characterization of akratic belief that undercuts the motivation for denying its possibility. I turn now to asking, not what belief is, but how we typically recognize that someone has a belief. We can then apply the results to the special case of *akrasia*.

**3. Attributing *Akrasia***

To show that the possibility of akratic belief should be accepted as a pre-theoretical datum, it is helpful to have both intuitively plausible examples and responses to impossibility arguments. I do not claim to have addressed every impossibility argument one might make; some others have already been addressed, and others may not yet have been made.[[14]](#footnote-14) I want to turn instead to a more general and less defensive argument, which I will call

*The Argument from Belief Attribution*

1. People often attribute belief based on one or more typical marks of belief, such as sensitivity to reasons, recall, felt conviction, reporting or assertion, and use in further reasoning.
2. These marks are present in some purportedly akratic cases, to an extent that ordinarily justifies belief attribution.
3. So, these marks justify attribution of some akratic beliefs.

Rather than appealing to a theory of the nature of belief, to intuitively plausible examples of akratic belief, or to failings in impossibility arguments, this argument rests on a more general view about belief attribution, and applies that view to akratic belief.[[15]](#footnote-15) To make the argument convincing, we need to take a closer look at the attribution of belief more generally and of akratic belief in particular. I will then turn to objections to the argument in §4.

We can begin with premise (1). Under what circumstances do we ordinarily come to believe that, for example, Calvin believes he is fat? What would it take for you to attribute this belief to him? In typical cases, we might hear him say “I’m so fat,” or “I’m fat and proud,” or “Fat guys like me don’t make a lot of friends,” or he might report the belief itself by saying “I think I’m really fat.” He might seem to feel very sure that he is fat. He might often recall and mention his weight. He might point to his love-handles or his body mass index as evidence that he is fat, and be willing to reconsider his belief if his body mass index goes down. We might observe him counting calories or signing up for weight-loss programs, without ever hearing him say “I’m fat” directly, and take his behavior as grounds for attributing the belief. Sensitivity to reasons, recall, felt conviction, reporting or assertion, and use in further reasoning are common marks of belief, by which beliefs are often attributed. When observed all together, these marks are typically taken as strong signs of the presence of a belief, whatever the underlying nature of belief may be. But even one or a few of them are often taken as sufficient grounds for belief attribution. When asked why we believe Calvin believes he is fat, we often think it enough to reply “I heard him say so,” or “He’s dieting again.”

Many theoretical conceptions of belief take one or more of these marks as central to the nature of belief itself. For De Sousa (1971, p. 64), “B*p* [belief that *p*] is a *disposition to assent.*” Williamson (2000, p. 99) suggests that, “Intuitively, one believes *p* outright when one is willing to use *p* as a premise in practical reasoning.” In his Appendix to the *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume (2000, p. 396) writes: “belief is nothing but a peculiar feeling, different from the simple conception.” Cohen (1992, p. 5) similarly writes that “Belief is a disposition to feel”; that is, although it is a disposition, “Belief is a disposition normally to feel that things are thus-or-so, not a disposition to say that they are or to act accordingly” (1992, p. 8). These views see assent, or further reasoning, or “credal feelings” such as conviction (Cohen 1992, p. 11) as central to the nature of belief.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Considering these theories is instructive in several ways. First, we do not need to accept or reject any of these theories to attribute a belief based on some particular mark of belief. Many people attribute beliefs in these ways without having any settled theoretical conception of their underlying nature.

Second, we also do not need to accept or reject any of these theories in order to accept premise (1). Premise (1) does not depend on them for its appeal. On the contrary: as Williamson’s use of “intuitively” suggests, these theories may themselves derive some of their plausibility from the widespread use of their favored mark in attributing belief. If this is true, adherence to these various theories may provide some evidence that the marks are widely used in belief attribution. But that evidence is not crucial, and we can accept premise (1) without it.

Third, and relatedly, premise (1) is much more modest than any of these theories. It does not claim that belief attribution always uses these marks, or that these marks correspond in any particular way to the nature of belief, or that the widespread use of these marks is justified or appropriate. In claiming only that belief attribution *often* uses various marks such as these, premise (1) should be fairly uncontroversial; the premise most in need of defense is premise (2).

Lastly, these theories help bring out one way in which the ordinary marks of belief are defeasible. Accepting a theory of belief—especially a theory that recognizes only one legitimate mark of belief attribution—can lead us to revise our views about which belief attributions are correct. Nevertheless, these various marks seem to be intuitive, in the sense that they are widely used bases for belief attribution in ordinary cases. “I heard him say so,” “He’s dieting again,” and “He keeps pointing to his love handles” are all common reasons for attributing to someone the belief that he is fat. A theory would need to give us good reason to *stop* using them as grounds for attributing belief.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Supposing there is good reason to accept premise (1), why think these marks are sufficiently present in purportedly akratic cases to warrant attributing akratic belief? One case for premise (2) has been suggested by T.M. Scanlon. Belief, Scanlon (1998, p. 35) writes,

is not just a matter of judgment but of the connections, over time, between this judgment and dispositions to feel conviction, to recall as relevant, to employ as a premise in further reasoning, and so on. Insofar as akrasia involves the failure of these connections, it can occur in the case of belief as well as in that of intention and action. I may know, for example, that despite Jones’s pretensions to be a loyal friend, he is merely an artful deceiver. Yet when I am with him I may find the appearance of warmth and friendship so affecting that I find myself thinking, although I know better, that he can be relied on after all.

In this passage Scanlon begins to, as Rorty (1983, p. 191) puts it, “distinguish the strands” in the operation of belief more generally. Scanlon offers an open-ended list of characteristic dispositions: “dispositions to feel conviction, to recall as relevant, to employ as a premise in further reasoning, and so on.” I have added two other commonly recognized characteristic marks to Scanlon’s list: reportingthe belief or asserting its content, and a belief’s characteristic sensitivity to the evidence or reasons for it.[[18]](#footnote-18)

We can also distinguish a different lack or absence corresponding to each element:

1. *Dogmatism*. Some beliefs show little or no sensitivity to reasons.
2. *Lack of recall*. We can easily forget Jones’ deceit.
3. *Lack of conviction*. When we do remember Jones’ deceit, it might be without much felt conviction.
4. *Non-reporting and non-assertion*. We might not report believing that Jones is an artful deceiver (or a loyal friend), and not assert that he is, for various reasons.
5. *No further reasoning*. We can believe that Jones is an artful deceiver, but still go along with him.

With all of these combined, we can easily lose our sense that a person has the belief in question. If I do not recall my belief that Jones is an artful deceiver, feel no conviction in it, do not report the belief when asked, do not reconsider it when faced with evidence for or against it, and treat him as trustworthy at every turn, it seems unclear how I count as having the belief at all. On the other hand, we can recognize a belief even when one or more of these marks are absent. Someone can believe that people of different races are not equally intelligent, without telling anyone she believes it or reconsidering it in response to contrary evidence.

A secret and dogmatic belief is not thereby an akratic one. When do these various “failings” amount to *akrasia*? Scanlon’s passage suggests that “Insofar as akrasia involves the failure of these connections, it can occur in the case of belief.” But the failure of these various connections tends, on the contrary, to undermine our sense that something is a belief. It is, rather, the *presence* of these connections to reasons, conviction, and so on, that serves as ordinary marks of belief. An akratic belief is a belief one believes one should not have. So an akratic belief state has two component beliefs: the belief that I am fat, or that black cats bring bad luck, or that external objects exist, or that Jones is a loyal friend, together with the belief that I should not have that first belief. We can recognize the first belief as akratic, whenever we can rightly attribute both beliefs.

Take “Jones is a loyal friend” and “I should not believe that Jones is a loyal friend.” If we believe both of these propositions, the first belief will probably not be ideally sensitive to evidence. If it were, we would reconsider it in light of the evidence of Jones’ deceit. On the other hand, the second belief will not be one we apply well in further reasoning. If we reasoned from it consistently, we would probably come to suspend the first belief. In practice, we probably will not even recall the second belief in some circumstances. When Jones is present, the second belief may be far from our minds, even if we angrily fixate on his deceit at other times. Our feeling of conviction in both beliefs might waver, as will our reports, though it might be natural to expect that we report the second belief more often. We might then have a relatively dogmatic belief that Jones is a loyal friend, and a less than ideally operative belief that we should not believe this.

Nevertheless, I think it is sometimes possible to recognize both of these beliefs as beliefs. Each one shows paradigmatic marks by which we attribute beliefs in ordinary cases. Each one may even show all five marks to some extent, although certain marks will point more clearly to one belief than to the other. I might cite reasons for thinking Jones is a loyal friend, feel strongly that he is, say so to others, and remember and act on this belief when he asks for a loan, while also often feeling sure I should not believe it, remembering others he has conned, and asking other friends to help me remember not to trust him. Many of us have seen a friendship, or a romantic breakup, with these features. In akratic belief, both component beliefs suffer some impairment: one becomes at least somewhat dogmatic, for example, while the other is not always operative in further reasoning. But we normally recognize that many of our beliefs, akratic or not, can be dogmatic, or held without much felt conviction, or forgotten in some relevant circumstances. If we can recognize such beliefs in non-akratic cases, we should be able to recognize them in akratic cases as well.

If this is right, both premises of the Argument from Belief Attribution are plausible, and the conclusion follows. Whereas the ‘intuitive’ argument of §1 appeals to *examples* of apparently *akratic* belief, this argument appeals to commonly accepted marks of belief more generally, in abstraction from *akrasia*, and then applies those more general marks to the narrower category of akratic belief. But by drawing on our recognition of the typical marks of belief attribution, the argument can still be convincing without appealing to a theoretical conception of the nature of belief.

Because it avoids theoretical debates about the nature of belief, the Argument from Belief Attribution establishes that akratic belief is possible only in a preliminary, pre-theoretical way—just as a parallel argument about akratic action would be preliminary, pending the results of a more sustained consideration of the nature of action. But the argument gives us good reason to treat akratic belief as a pre-theoretical datum. To convince us to reject that datum, a theory of belief should offer compelling reasons to revise our ordinary practices of belief attribution.

Before turning to objections, it is worth emphasizing the ways in which this form of argument is consistent with a wide range of views about the nature of belief. First, it concerns the ways in which we recognize that someone has a belief, not the underlying nature of belief itself. There is no need to draw any conception of belief from Scanlon to make the argument. One can think of belief as a disposition, or as some other kind of functional state, or as a representation stored in the mind or brain, or as a relation to such a representation, or as a physical state of the brain, or as some combination of these, or in some other way.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Second, and relatedly, I have not said whether the characteristic marks of belief should be thought of simply as marks by which one can attribute a belief to oneself or others, or also as partly or entirely *constituting* belief—as themselves being the belief state. For our purposes, it does not matter, except insofar as it allows a description of akratic belief to be consistent with a wide range of theoretical views. This second kind of neutrality is useful for the first. Whatever beliefs are, metaphysically speaking, we can focus on the conditions under which they are properly attributed.

Lastly, we need not insist that any of the marks I considered is the most important, or that they are all essential or even significant. Here again, a wide range of theoretical views can offer a similar description of akratic belief, even when they accept a different or more limited set of marks—even when, on some theoretical views of belief, a “distinguishing of strands” is unnecessary or impossible. As we saw, some theories of belief understand belief entirely in terms of a disposition to assent (De Sousa 1971), or willingness to engage in further reasoning (Williamson 2000), or feeling (Hume 2000, Cohen 1992). Each of these theories is likely to make the possibility of akratic belief easier, rather than harder, to defend. According to these theories, to agree that someone believes both that Jones is a loyal friend, and that he should not believe this, we need only find that he says “yes” to both propositions, or reasons from both, or feels that both are true, respectively, to an extent characteristic of belief. It is relatively *easy* to recognize some cases in which a person feels conviction in “I am fat” and “I should not believe I am fat,” or assents to both, or reasons from both. The attribution of akratic belief thus does not depend essentially on any “distinguishing of strands” in belief attribution. But distinguishing and acknowledging several marks by which we ordinarily attribute belief gives a more easily recognizable picture of the ways in which we ordinarily attribute beliefs. By suggesting how ordinary forms of belief attribution can apply in akratic cases, it helps make plausible the thought that the possibility of akratic belief should be accepted as a datum to which a theoretical conception of belief is answerable.[[20]](#footnote-20)

So far, we have seen two lines of thought that support the possibility of akratic belief, apart from responding to arguments against that possibility. First, I offered a series of examples: the anorexic, the superstitious person, the cheated spouse, the gambler, the gullible friend, the knowing self-overrater, the conflicted skeptic, the “unlovable” or “unliked” person, the climate change procrastinator, and Scanlon deceived by Jones, all apparently stuck, perhaps with varying degrees of self-awareness, believing what they themselves believe they should not believe. These examples seem to be vivid cases of akratic belief, and offer an initial case for its possibility. Second, I offered an Argument from Belief Attribution, arguing that the ordinary marks by which we attribute belief can sometimes be present in both component beliefs of an akratic state. When we consider how we attribute beliefs more generally, I argued, we can come to see at least some apparent cases of akratic belief as ones in which the beliefs in question are properly attributed. The appeal to examples and the Argument from Belief Attribution are naturally combined. Some examples of belief seem to be cases of akratic belief; and when we consider the conditions under which we attribute beliefs more generally, we can see how belief can sometimes be akratic.

**4. Objections and Replies**

I turn now to three kinds of objection to the Argument from Belief Attribution. The first objects to counting akratic beliefs as beliefs; the second objects to considering them akratic; and the third concerns the pre-theoretical status of the possibility of akratic belief.

At this point, puzzlement about the possibility of *akrasia* can culminate in a final statement of the central doubt. Why think that in the case of anorexia, or superstition, or Jones, or in any other such example, the “beliefs” count as genuine beliefs at all? Can they not be described, depending on the case, as one belief and one mere inclination to believe, or even just as a failure to believe anything? Why assume that it is possible for two so tightly conflicting beliefs to coexist? How is the description of an akratic belief not just a description of failure to believe, with the label “belief” attached to it? As Schwitzgebel (2010, p. 544) asks in a different context: “does it add anything of value” to attribute beliefs in these cases?[[21]](#footnote-21) Though I have already partly answered these questions, an objector can ask for more. What does attributing akratic belief add to our understanding of the examples we considered?

This kind of doubt may be assuming a particular conception of the nature of belief, or at least ruling out many such conceptions. As we saw, if belief is a disposition to assent, or to reason from a proposition, or to feel conviction, the objection has a straightforward answer: if we say and feel that we are fat, and go on a diet, but also say and feel that we should not believe we are fat, and buy self-help books on anorexia, then, on any of these conceptions of belief, we do believe these things, rather than failing to believe either or both of them. But even if the objection is theoretically motivated, I think we can say more, pre-theoretically, to help address it.

Here, it is worth remembering that many cases of seemingly akratic belief are not genuinely akratic. Some cases are merely cases of conflicting first-order beliefs, or rapid changes of mind, or cognitive dissonance, or imaginings, or other alternatives to *akrasia*. If an objection insists that seemingly akratic belief can actually be something else, the right reply is that the objection is correct. Many seemingly akratic cases are not really akratic at all. The Argument from Belief Attribution resists only the view that *all* cases of apparently akratic belief must be something else, despite the presence of typical marks such as felt conviction, further reasoning, and so on.[[22]](#footnote-22) When someone intensely regrets his own constant dieting, seeks treatment while starving himself, and tells us: “It’s crazy and I know I shouldn’t believe it, but I really do believe I’m fat,” the Argument from Belief Attribution encourages us to take these marks at face value as signs of akratic belief. Doubts about the Argument from Belief Attribution can then be answered, not by disputes over difficult borderline cases, but by considering comparatively clear cases of akratic belief. What does it add to attribute akratic belief in these cases, instead of conceiving of these cases in some other way?

First, and perhaps most importantly, attribution of *akrasia* points to the way each belief is integrated into a range of cognitive activity. Anorexia, in particular, affects a stunningly large number of daily decisions about food, exercise, spending, and social interaction.[[23]](#footnote-23) Adapting our earlier example, imagine Calvin a few years later, struggling to recover from anorexia. On the one hand, Calvin can make a wide range of inferences from a belief that he should not believe he is fat. He might infer that his judgment is impaired, that mirrors cannot be trusted, that he needs to find someone to buy groceries with, and that he needs professional help. And he might reason from and act on those inferences in many further ways. On the other hand, Calvin might often conclude that it is time to exercise again, or, after two bites, that he is done with his meal. And he might engage in further reasoning from those conclusions. He might exercise on a fast day, take a drug to help him get through it, and sneak out of his family home at just the right moment to make it work, carefully avoiding the pro-eating reminders he has posted for himself so that they do not lead him to give up his belief that he is fat. Akratic conflict can be inferentially complex. What Aristotle (1999, p. 1142b18) called “calculating” *akrasia* is no less possible in belief than in action, and is similarly useful in seeing that a case is akratic.

Second, attribution of *akrasia* brings out the distinctive role of each belief in inhibiting the other. Without his akratic belief, Calvin would likely be on the path to recovery. On the other hand, without his belief that he should not believe he is fat, his undereating could become less hesitant and more dangerous. Each belief looks partial largely because it has a standing obstacle in the other belief. Attribution of *akrasia* brings out this peculiarly doxastic tension.[[24]](#footnote-24) It gives us a picture of conflict between beliefs, each of them rationally functioning to a large degree, and each normally ready to manifest fully were it not for the other belief. Attributing *akrasia* helps us distinguish akratic conflict from other ways of falling short of ideally consistent, unwavering belief.

Lastly, attributing *akrasia* offers a way to do justice to self-reports of akratic belief. Though it is controversial that belief can be akratic, it is much harder to deny that people can think of themselvesas believing akratically. Someone can say, or think: “I know I shouldn’t believe it, but I really do believe bad things happen when black cats walk in front of you.” Or: “It doesn’t make sense and I shouldn’t even think it, but I’m convinced I need to lose weight.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Of course, it is possible to misidentify or misattribute one’s own mental states.[[26]](#footnote-26) But it is harder to believe that self-attribution of akratic belief must *always*, and necessarily, be mistaken. If akratic belief is impossible, reports like these can never be taken at face value. They would always have to be indicative of some other state, combined with a confusion about the proper attribution of belief in one’s own case. If belief can be akratic, there is no need to deny that such reports could ever be accurate. We can simply allow that an anorexic can sometimes be self-aware enough to see how distorted his own picture of himself is, even as he continues to maintain that picture.

For all these reasons, I think we should allow that the component states in cases of apparently akratic belief can sometimes be beliefs. In some similar cases, of course, they may not be. But there is no need to insist that everything that seems to be akratic belief must actually be something else.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Let us turn to a second kind of objection, which allows that the “beliefs” in question are genuine beliefs. Are they the *kind* of beliefs that can be akratic? Akratic action is usually described as voluntary or, in the contemporary literature, intentional. If action is only akratic when it is voluntary or intentional, akratic belief can seem to require something similar. This would explain why Rorty “argues…for treating believing as the sort of voluntary condition that can be akratic”(1983, p. 181). For Mele (1987, p. 112), akratic belief must “by definition” be “motivated.” According to Owens (2002, p. 388), belief cannot be akratic, partly because “To yield an account of epistemic akrasia,…believing must be purposive; belief must be aimed at a goal.” These writers assume that a belief be voluntary, motivated, or goal-directed to deserve the label “akratic.”

That assumption is questionable. It might be true that akratic action must be voluntary, motivated, and goal-directed. But this might be true, not because akratic action is akratic, but because it is action. There is no need to assume that, to deserve the label “akratic,” beliefs too must be voluntary, motivated, or goal-directed. Examples like the gambler’s fallacy, driven by misguided tendencies of reasoning without ulterior motive, should already make us suspicious of such requirements. The relevant question seems to be: Can we believe against our own better judgment? That is, can we believe what we believe we should not believe? If we think of *akrasia* as a failure of self-control, we might also ask: can these beliefs manifest a failure of self-control in the realm of belief? The answer to each question seems to be yes. We can recognize, in some cases, a belief that the believer believes she should not have. This belief can be under the believer’s control, in some of the ways beliefs normally are. It can be based on apparent evidence, inferred from other beliefs she holds, and incorporated into a larger chain of thought that gives rise to action. At the same time, the belief shows a failure of self-control, since the believer is unable to bring it in line with what she believes she ought to believe.[[28]](#footnote-28) An akratic anorexic can defy his own better judgment by believing he is fat, even while, convinced by his doctor, he understands that he is malnourished and should not believe what he believes.

It can also be tempting to insist that truly akratic belief must be knowing or “clear-eyed,” in the sense that the believer is aware that she believes something against her own better judgment. When “akratic” belief is not clear-eyed, one might wonder, should it really count as akratic? But once again, this restriction on kinds of belief is poorly motivated. Surely akratic action can be either clear-eyed or not; and it is not clear why akratic belief would not admit of both clear-eyed and unaware varieties. If clear-eyed akratic belief is impossible, this impossibility would then not undermine the possibility of akratic belief more generally. It could still be possible to believe what one believes one should not believe, but not knowingly. We would have to imagine Calvin without much self-awareness. But we would not have to “deny the possibility of akratic belief” (Adler 2002, p. 1) altogether, or accept that “the unavailability of the akratic structure is…constitutive of belief” (Hurley 1989, p. 131), or concede to Levy (2004, p. 151) that “The evidence against…retains no further power to move us against our own best judgment.”

The Argument from Belief Attribution need not insist that akratic belief can be clear-eyed. But it also suggests why clear-eyed akratic belief, too, may be worth accepting as a pre-theoretical datum. Suppose Calvin says: “It doesn’t make sense and I shouldn’t even think it, but I’m convinced I need to lose weight.” His comment might leave us puzzled about why he believes what he does. But he is reporting a belief, and he seems sure. He might also reason from the belief, by saying: “I believe a lot of things I shouldn’t believe.” As the Argument from Belief Attribution reminds us, our usual practices of belief attribution suggest that we take Calvin’s self-report at face value, and attribute clear-eyed akratic belief to him. A conception of the nature of belief could give us reason to deny this datum—perhaps without denying the possibility of akratic belief more generally—but it would need to offer a rationale for that denial.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Turning to a third kind of objection, one might doubt the possibility of explaining how belief can be akratic without appealing to a theoretical conception of belief. This doubt can take two forms. One can doubt that we can fully illuminate the workings of akratic belief without help from a general conception of the nature of belief. Or one can object that, until we rule out theories of belief on which akratic belief is impossible, we have not shown *that* akratic belief is possible; and, surely, if akratic belief is impossible, we cannot explain how it is possible.

I think both versions of this doubt are partly correct. A theoretical conception of belief should help us understand phenomena such as akratic belief. This is part of the point of theory. And it is true that I have not rejected any particular theoretical view, including theories that rule out *akrasia*. If, for example, eliminative materialism is true, we should not think of the world as including beliefs at all. If there are no beliefs, there are certainly no akratic beliefs. Or if a theory of belief requires that belief be perfectly or near-perfectly sensitive to the relevant evidence, that theory may rule out the possibility of akratic belief.[[30]](#footnote-30) Although the Argument from Belief Attribution is consistent with a wide range of theories, it is not consistent with all theories. And if the overall set of considerations in favor of a theory is compelling, it may lead us to accept that theory, and reject the possibility of akratic belief.

But all of this is true of akratic action as well. It seems to me that I ate some sweets this morning, while believing I should not eat them. This appearance is inconsistent with eliminative materialism, on which there are no beliefs, and with conceptions of action on which akratic action is impossible. It may be possible to find independently compelling reasons for accepting one of these theories. We would then have reason to reject the possibility of akratic action. But this does little to shake my confidence that I acted akratically this morning. The mere possibility of having reason to accept some such theory does not lead us, now, to accept any such theory or its implications. And although we must admit that adherents of these theories will deny the possibility of akratic action, we can still have good reasons to believe in that possibility, while, as usual, maintaining some openness to revising our beliefs in light of new evidence.

Ihave argued that our ordinary ways of attributing belief apply naturally in some akratic cases. These applications support taking initial examples of akratic belief at face value, as pre-theoretical data that theory should help illuminate. Some pre-theoretical data can later be rejected in light of further reflection. But to reject these data, we would need compelling independent reason for accepting a theory that rules out the data as impossible. Moreover, the data make any such theory harder to accept. In both action and belief, accepting the phenomenon of *akrasia* as a pre-theoretical datum is damaging to theories that ignore the datum. Recognizing a wide range of cases as cases of akratic belief imposes a cost on insisting that these cases must all be cases of something else. These cases provide some of the means of resisting what Bortolotti (2012, p. 39) calls a “tendency towards idealising beliefs in the philosophy of mind.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

Considering ordinary belief attributions in these cases also offers a direct, though admittedly incomplete, way of explaining how belief can be akratic. In akratic belief, we can say, the believer must have both component beliefs. She can have those beliefs, in more or less the ways in which people usually have beliefs. We can see the operation of these beliefs in the believer’s sensitivity to reasons for them, recall, felt conviction, reporting, and further reasoning from those beliefs. In *akrasia* these are partly impaired, in ways we often recognize in various other beliefs. Some impairments are so severe that they undermine the attribution of the beliefs, and thus of *akrasia.* But in other cases, the beliefs can still be recognizable despite the conflict that impairs them. With some limitations that we accept in other cases of belief, both beliefs continue to operate as beliefs do, each one remaining integrated into a range of inferences and other cognitive activity. Roughly speaking, that is how belief can be akratic. This is an answer to my title’s question, which we can look to theory to extend and refine. It still leaves open the possibility that an independently motivated theory may lead us to give up the view that akratic belief—or akratic action—is possible. But we now have some powerful reasons for believing that belief can be akratic, just as action can. These reasons grant akratic belief its rightful status as a pre-theoretically recognizable phenomenon, which theories need good reason to deny.

**5. Why is Akratic Belief So Puzzling?**

We see here one kind of striking inner conflict in which we sometimes find ourselves. With this conflict in view, it can begin to seem strange that akratic belief ever seems so puzzling that its very possibility is in doubt. Why, then, can akratic belief seem so puzzling? If we can answer this question, we might be able to more effectively address the puzzle.

An argument like the Nullification Argument *would* show that akratic belief is puzzling and even impossible, if the argument were sound. But as we saw, that argument depends on a sense of puzzlement, rather than explaining or supporting that sense. Although the argument can illustrate our puzzlement about akratic belief, we need to look elsewhere for an explanation. Still, I think we can say why we might still be puzzled by akratic belief even if we accept its possibility as a pre-theoretical datum. An explanation of our puzzlement can also complete a response to the Nullification Argument, by diagnosing the argument’s appeal, and can help address resistance to the Argument from Belief Attribution.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Akratic belief is puzzling, partly in the ways akratic action is puzzling. One wants to ask: If you think you shouldn’t be doing this, why are you doing it? If you think you shouldn’t believe it, why do you? The answers given in particular cases can seem at best unsatisfying. Someone might say: “Because eight tails in a row *never* happens.” This reasoning makes little sense. Eight tails in a row is a very rare outcome; but for fair coins that just saw seven tails in a row, it happens 50% of the time. In akratic cases, this is not only obvious; it is accepted by the speaker. Bafflement is a natural reaction. It is natural to have trouble understanding what a speaker is doing in offering an answer she herself believes is unsatisfying. If the answer is instead: “No reason,” or: “I just do believe it,” bafflement is just as natural. Our ordinary practices of asking for justification are constantly frustrated by akratic cases. This makes akratics difficult to interact with and even to comprehend. It is puzzling that someone can be so disunified, and still be a single person.

This is a way to say why akratic belief is puzzling. It makes it natural to ask how akratic belief can be akratic. But one might also ask: “how can *belief* be akratic?” Some of us may be puzzled by akratic belief in ways that we are not puzzled, or not quite as puzzled, by akratic action. Relatedly, one can feel that it is in some way “harder” to maintain an akratic belief than it is to complete an akratic action. Even if akratic belief is possible, it can seem to be an especially unstable or distinctively puzzling state. What might explain a puzzlement that is specific to akratic belief?[[33]](#footnote-33)

We have already seen one answer to this question. Prior commitment to a theory about belief, intentional action, or *akrasia* can itself make akratic belief seem distinctively puzzling. If we assume that a person’s beliefs must be consistent, or deny that beliefs exist, akratic belief is likely to seem impossible. If we believe, with Rorty, Mele, or Owens, that *akrasia* in general must be voluntary, motivated, or goal-directed, belief can seem too disanalogous to count as akratic. If, as we saw in §2, a theoretical conception leads us to see belief as very tightly connected to evaluation of the grounds for the belief, akratic belief can again seem ruled out. We can then lose sight of the possibilities of holding, and reasoning with, beliefs that we ourselves believe we should not have.

But akratic belief can seem distinctively puzzling, even without a theory. This puzzlement can have more than one source, with different explanations in each case.

To begin with, belief, however we understand it, is normally thought of as an ongoing state or activity, rather than an event. In this respect, belief resembles intention rather than action. Many of us see intentions as lasting much longer than the corresponding actions do. It can be especially puzzling that I would intend all year to diet next summer, believing all the while that I should not intend it. How can I go all year without reconsidering the intention? I can take an extra scoop of ice cream after dinner against my better judgment; but how can I intend all day to take it? In the case of an ongoing intention that precedes action, there is often a less powerful temptation to go against one’s own belief, and, at the same time, a longer opportunity to give up the intention. If intention, rather than action, is the practical analogue of belief, one should expect that akratic belief would seem more puzzling or harder to maintain than akratic action, just as akratic intention does. This seems to be a genuine difference between akratic belief and akratic action.

Moreover, unlike akratic action and intention, akratic belief conflicts with another belief—a state of the same kind. Akratic action displays a more heterogenous conflict or tension between an action and a belief. Akratic intention, too, involves conflict between states of two different kinds. Whatever our views, many people may *think* that the inferential or rational connections between two beliefs may be closer and more difficult to avoid than those between a belief and an action or intention. Although a theoretical conception of belief and intention is likely needed to defend this thought, it may point to another genuine difference.[[34]](#footnote-34)

There can also be a real difference with a contingent psychological explanation. Akratic action and intention might in fact be more common than akratic belief in humans as a biological species. Pears (1982, p. 50) writes: “Vividness and other similar qualities of perceptual cues have much less force than the special qualities of physical appetites which make them such successful rebels.” Those of us who are especially carried away by the vividness of perceptual cues, the misleading appeal of fallacious reasoning, or, in some cases, wishful thinking or self-deception, might be especially prone to akratic belief. The rest of us might be mostly immune, just as the most virtuous or continent among us rarely or never act akratically. The difference in force is likely to be at least partly contingent on the details of human psychology. Humans might be stronger—more able to resist temptation—in belief than in action, whereas other species, real or imagined, might be mostly continent in practice but terribly susceptible to the gambler’s fallacy, even when they know better. Relative rarity and difficulty are not always signs of an underlying metaphysical difference.

All of these features can make akratic belief difficult to imagine. The difficulty is understandable. Imagining someone’s point of view is hardest when she does not quite have a single point of view, or has one that does not make sense. Nevertheless, those of us who are relatively immune to akratic belief, or relatively bad at recognizing it in ourselves, can underestimate how stable akratic belief can be. For someone living with anorexia, or superstition, or the gambler’s fallacy, akratic belief may be a constant fact of life; the difficulty can instead be in reaching, or even imagining, a state in which one’s beliefs are what one believes they should be.

The imaginative difficulty is compounded if akratic belief is less common than akratic action. In the case of akratic action, we rarely need imagination; we have examples of akratic action all around us and, all too often, in ourselves. But akratic belief might indeed be somewhat less common in our species than akratic action. The situation of an akratic anorexic, or gambler, or superstitious person is then, for some of us, both complex and foreign. It can take some reminders and some careful description of a range of examples to restore insight into the plight of an akratic believer.

I have tried to explain our natural puzzlement about the possibility of akratic belief. I do not mean to dissolve the puzzlement. We *should* be puzzled. Akratic belief shows a worrying and intensely conflicting mismatch between our own beliefs and what we ourselves believe they should be. Puzzlement is appropriate. One mark of an understanding of *akrasia* is its ability to explain, not only how *akrasia* is possible, but why it is puzzling. On the explanation I just offered, akratic belief is puzzling in a variety of ways. At their heart is an impairment in the unified perspective that many of us expect in our interlocutors and fellow reasoners. Akratic believers often reason in confused ways; have conflicts between two ongoing states of the same basic mental kind; fit poorly into some theories of belief; and present cases many of us are unaccustomed to thinking about, either because we rarely encounter them or because we prefer to avoid thinking about them.

We can illustrate this puzzlement with the case of Calvin. Believing akratically that he is fat, Calvin (we can imagine) undertakes complex and extreme weight loss regimens, while also regularly posting reminders for himself to eat more and asking friends to help him stop believing he is fat. What is the world like, on Calvin’s picture of it? Is it a world in which he is fat, or a world in which he is not? Neither answer seems right. What is Calvin like? One should not *simply* say he believes he is fat, without adding important qualifications. But it also seems odd to simply say he believes he is not fat, or that he is agnostic or undecided. Calvin is conflicted. He gives reasons for believing he is fat, but they are not very good, as he himself might often recognize. Calvin is hard to understand, hard to characterize, and also hard to persuade. What is the point of trying to convince him he should not believe he is fat, if he already agrees? Calvin lacks a coherent picture of himself, in ways that make interacting with him confusing and frustrating. This puzzling and frustrating disunity is largely shared with akratic action, but it also has its distinctive features, which can lead us to wonder how belief can be akratic at all.

Still, if I am right, Calvin can be both puzzling and real—a character many of us have been or at least encountered. The impossibility of akratic belief is a fiction, symptomatic of theoretical bias, or lack of imagination, or both. We can recognize akratic belief in the ways we recognize any other belief, albeit with some additional difficulty and bafflement. Like akratic action, or climate change denial, akratic belief can be puzzling without being impossible or even rare. And if a theoretical conception of belief does not recognize akratic belief, we should be more hesitant to recognize the theory as true. A theory that rules out the possibility of akratic belief is, for that reason, less believable.

We can explain both how belief can be akratic, and why akratic belief is puzzling. We can also explain why it can seem puzzling that people find it quite so puzzling. There is something odd about the expectation of such coherence in an ordinary human life—something out of touch with the striking divisions within a single person’s patterns of reasoning and conviction. Like the denial of the possibility of akratic action, puzzlement about the possibility of akratic belief has an air of blindness to the conditions of life, at least when that puzzlement reaches the point of denying the very possibility of the phenomenon.

The point can be put less critically. Accepting the possibility and the variety of akratic belief is part of having a lifelike picture of ordinary cognition. It is likely to foster compassionate and resolute interaction with those who are especially prone to *akrasia*. It might lower a natural resistance to recognizing *akrasia* in one’s own case. It shows us some of the limits of the thought that each of us has a single, unified point of view. And, I think, it prevents us from drawing a misleading disanalogy between theoretical and practical reasoning. In both, the conclusions we believe we should reach can differ starkly from the ones we actually come to.

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1. I will not repeatedly distinguish an “epistemic” and an “all-things-considered” “should”; for this distinction in the context of akratic belief, see Mele (1987, pp. 110-113). I have in mind an epistemic “should”; but what I say can be adapted to beliefs that use “should” in other senses. I believe what follows can also be adapted to closely related phenomena such as alienated belief (Hunter 2011) and “naughty” beliefs, or beliefs one believes are false (Huddleston 2012), but I will not argue this in the text.

   The anorexic example, though troubling, would still be a relatively moderate case of anorexia. In many cases, an anorexic can be unable to hear a doctor’s advice, and can even refuse life-saving treatment. Bowden (2012), Arnold (2013), and Dunkle and Dunkle (2015) provide striking accounts, and Giordano (2005, p. 18) treats complete acceptance of the impulse to be thin as essential to full-blown anorexia. It may be more accurate to imagine the akratic “anorexic” as a borderline or partly recovered anorexic, though I will leave out this qualification. Though I will mostly use feminine pronouns as default pronouns, I changed the gender in the anorexic example to avoid perpetuating the perception that all anorexics are female. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Elga (2005) and Greco (2012), respectively. On the gambler’s fallacy, see Tversky and Kahneman (1971). Some examples are of course controversial; but the range of apparent examples is wide. Just about anything one can believe, it seems, is something one can at the same time believe one should not believe. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It has its occasional skeptic. See Hare (1963, Ch. 5), and Watson (1977). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See especially Hurley (1989, pp. 131-5), Adler (2002a, 2002b), Owens (2002), and Raz (2009, p. 42) for influential examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Many of these concern higher-order evidence. See Greco (2014), Horowitz (2014), Lasonen-Aarnio (2020), Christensen (2021), and the essays collected in Skipper and Steglich-Petersen (2019), among others. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. On impossibility arguments, see n.4 above. For defenses of the possibility of akratic belief, see Rorty (1983), Heil (1984), Mele (1986; 1987, Ch. 8), Scanlon (1998, p. 35), Levy (2004), Tenenbaum (2007, Ch. 7), Borgoni (2015), and Chislenko (2016), and for a helpful, related defense of the possibility of beliefs we believe are false, see Huddleston (2012). I discuss many of these below. To my knowledge, none of these offer an extended discussion of belief attribution, puzzlement about akratic belief, or the status of akratic belief as a pre-theoretical datum. Still, Borgoni (2015) is particularly helpful, including a discussion of self-control and of kinds of akratic belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I argue this in more detail in §2 below, in the context of one impossibility argument. For a similar diagnosis of appeals to Moore’s paradox, see Chislenko (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See §4 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The tendency to assume that akratic belief is possible, notable in discussions of the rationality of akratic belief, can itself be taken as a basis for a further argument that the possibility of akratic belief is intuitive. But I think the power of this particular argument is limited. It appeals to a relatively small statistical sample that is partly self-selecting, since skeptics about akratic belief are unlikely to debate its rationality. And some philosophers may be assuming a particular conception of belief, rather than treating akratic belief as a pre-theoretical datum. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The division into argument types is somewhat artificial, since examples and defense play a role in later sections. Rather than keep the arguments clearly separate, my aim is to combine them into a more powerful argument for the possibility of akratic belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For other, similar examples, see Adler (2002a, p. 70), and Dretske (1971, pp. 216-7). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Owens here relies on a variant of premise (1), but includes the caveat “freely and deliberately,” which makes his denial more limited. I return to such restrictions on what counts as akratic belief in §4. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. One might think the argument can be made more compelling by revising the premises. For example, premise (1) could be changed to read: “To believe that *p*, a person must not believe there is conclusive reason against believing that *p*.” This would remove the regress. But it would also be more baldly question-begging, in the way I go on to argue that the Nullification Argument is. Whether we can believe against our own better—or in this case, conclusive—judgment is precisely what is at issue.

    Alternatively, one might try to make the Nullification Argument more plausible by appealing to a distinction between explicit and implicit, or conscious and unconscious, belief. Premise (1) may seem more plausible if it claims only that, to believe that *p*, a person must *implicitly*, or perhaps unconsciously, believe there is reason to believe that *p*. I think this does make premise (1) more plausible, but at the cost of making premise (2) even less plausible when the corresponding change is made there. It is especially hard to see why, when someone believes there is conclusive reason to believe *not p*, she cannot even implicitly or unconsciously believe she has reason to believe that *p*. This claim seems to idealize ordinary believers, in addition to raising the other problems I mention in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. On other impossibility arguments and responses to them, see nn. 4 and 6 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. One might instead attempt an argument that appeals directly to marks of *akratic* belief, rather than marks of belief more generally. I do not rule out the possibility of such an argument, but I have two hesitations. First, I am not sure what these marks of *akrasia* would be, since features like inner conflict are also characteristic of related phenomena such as indecision and contradictory belief. Second, and relatedly, I am not sure the use of such marks is robust or widespread enough to support a convincing argument for the possibility of akratic belief, capable of dispelling doubts that these marks are proper bases for attributing *akrasia*. By contrast, it is hard to deny that beliefs more generally are often attributed based on some combination of sensitivity to evidence, recall, conviction, reporting or assertion, and further reasoning. So I find it more compelling to use the argumentative structure of applying widely used marks of belief to the specific case of *akrasia*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Discussions of belief that emphasize responsiveness to evidence or reasons include Van Leeuwen (2014), Ichino (2019), and Ganapini (2020); discussions that emphasize assent include Cherniak (1986) and Kaplan (1996); discussions that emphasize availability for further reasoning include Stich (1978), Glüer and Wikforss (2013), and Mandelbaum (2014). Other views combine two or more marks, or remain uncommittal. Quine and Ullian (1970, pp. 3-4), for example, write: “Believing…is a disposition…to respond in certain ways when the appropriate issue arises. To believe that Hannibal crossed the Alps is to be disposed, among other things, to say ‘Yes’ when asked.” This passage focuses on reporting one’s belief or asserting its content, but may also have in mind other responses, including further reasoning. Scanlon (1998), discussed in the body text below, suggests a similar view. Some writers explicitly downplay the importance of particular marks; for an influential argument against treating language use as essential in attributing belief, see Marcus (1990). I make no claim that my list of marks is exhaustive; other features of belief, such as resistance to reconsideration or additional causal or functional roles, may be marks as well. I mean only to identify several fairly widespread and uncontroversial marks by which belief is often attributed. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. There is a growing body of psychological research on these forms of belief attribution, as well as belief attribution in particular populations such as young children and autistic people, who at least often lack an explicit theoretical conception of the nature of belief. For a recent overview, see Curry (2018). Empirical findings provide further evidence for premise (1) in the Argument from Belief Attribution, and for the relative importance of particular marks. Rather than reviewing these findings, I will focus on premise (2) as the one in most need of defense. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Scanlon is interested in features of belief itself, whereas for our purposes, it is enough to focus on these characteristics merely as marks by which belief can be attributed. I return to this difference below. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For a useful recent survey of these and other views, see Schwitzgebel (2019). The Argument from Belief Attribution is consistent with a wide range of theories, but not with all of them; I consider conflicting theories in the next section. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The Argument from Belief Attribution is also consistent with a view of belief as requiring an *ability* to revise one’s beliefs in response to evidence. We can have difficulty exercising this ability, and we can sometimes fail; as Helton (2018, p. 23n24) puts it, “When this ability is masked, subjects can have conflicting beliefs.” The argument is also consistent with a view of belief in general as tending toward coherence, such that “failures to re-establish coherence are accompanied by a sense of distress” (Ganapini 2020, p. 3273). It can be distressing—rather than impossible—to believe both that Jones is a loyal friend, and that one should not believe this. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Schwitzgebel’s focus is on attribution of contradictory beliefs, rather than akratic ones; I believe the response I give here can be applied in that context as well, but I leave that aside. For a response to Schwitzgebel, including a discussion of self-reports of belief in the cases he has in mind, see Borgoni (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Thus, for example, we can agree with Ichino (2020, p. 216) that “many instances of superstitious attitudes are non-doxastic in nature”—just not all such instances, and in particular, not the ones that do not involve what Risen (2016) and Ichino (2020) call “acquiescence.” For helpful discussions of conflicting beliefs, see Huddleston (2012), Mylopoulos (2015), and Helton (2018). For a more detailed discussion and defense of the possibility of evidence-resistant beliefs, see Viedge (2018). Akratic belief becomes easier to attribute if a set of beliefs is relatively “fragmented”; on belief fragmentation, see Bendana and Mandelbaum (forthcoming). To keep my claims modest, I avoid assuming any particular view about the fragmentation of belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Memoirs are especially striking on this point; see Bowden (2012) and Dunkle and Dunkle (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ganapini (2020, p. 3273), quoted earlier, emphasizes “a sense of distress” in cases of integration failure as a mark of belief. I focus here on partial inhibition of inferential integration, rather than on felt distress, since I think phenomena such as felt distress or cognitive dissonance are also characteristic of other, non-doxastic conflict. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Such statements will immediately strike some as similar to Moore-paradoxical assertions or beliefs such as “It’s raining, but I don’t believe it.” For discussion of this similarity, see Chislenko (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For helpful discussions of self-ignorance and of mistaken meta-belief, see Schwitzgebel (2011) and Levy (2018), respectively. I take myself to agree with both of them, since neither claims that attributions of akratic belief are always mistaken; but Schwitzgebel (2010) can be extended to deny the possibility of akratic belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. One remaining motivation for this insistence can be traced to the desire to interpret believers charitably. On some principles of charity, as Davidson (1984, 27) puts it, “we must maximize the self-consistency we attribute,” being careful to avoid attributing inconsistency whenever possible. Charity can seem to rule out attributing akratic belief. Although charity of interpretation deserves a longer treatment that I can give it here, it is worth briefly mentioning four points in reply. First, akratic belief is not strictly inconsistent; a principle of charity would need some further rationale for its extension to akratic belief. (One might then also want to know whether the principle rules out attributing akratic action.) Second, a principle of charity that rules out *all* inconsistency or conflict is implausibly restrictive, and seems, at least intuitively, to emphasize charity over accuracy; surely humans are at least occasionally inconsistent. Third, acceptance of such a restrictive principle of charity would likely have to be supported by some theoretical considerations. Akratic belief could then still be a pre-theoretical datum, which theoretical considerations might convince us to deny. Finally, in some cases, attributing akratic belief may be more charitable than the alternative. When Calvin tells many people that he needs to lose weight, insists that he should not believe it, and undertakes elaborate measures to undermine his own weight loss schemes, it may be more generous to see him as harboring one inconsistency—the akratic belief that he is fat—rather than hundreds of inconsistent or inexplicable judgments or perhaps no belief at all. In any case, we once again need good theoretical reason to accept a principle that entails that belief could *never* be akratic. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. For an excellent discussion of this kind of “evaluative control,” see Hieronymi (2006); for a more detailed application to the case of akratic belief, see Borgoni (2015, pp. 838-41). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. In this way, the Argument from Belief Attribution has a potential application to contradictory belief, and even to clear-eyed contradictory belief. Priest (2006, pp. 96-7), for example, writes: “I…believe that the Russell set is both a member of itself and not a member of itself…. Many arguments, most of which appear in this book, convinced me of it.” Priest reports his contradictory belief, gives extensive evidence for it, reasons from it, and seems quite sure of it. An extension of the Argument from Belief Attribution to contradictory belief would encourage us to take his self-report at face value. Still, contradictory belief may fare differently both with respect to theoretical considerations for denying its possibility, and with respect to intuitive, defensive, systematic, and diagnostic arguments for treating its possibility as a pre-theoretical datum. It thus needs a separate treatment. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See Ganapini (2020) for a recent argument against a closely related view, which she calls “Strong Traditionalism” (3265). Ganapini’s own view is that “beliefs are minimally rational in the sense that they respond to *perceived* irrationality by re-establishing coherence” (3272), and that “clear failures to re-establish coherence are accompanied by a sense of distress” (3273). This view allows akratic belief that is not clear-eyed, or not perceived as akratic, and clear-eyed akratic belief accompanied by a sense of distress, though it may rule out the possibility of non-distressed clear-eyed akratic belief. Other theories may deny that some particular examples are akratic, while accommodating my main concern: allowing that akratic belief is possible in principle. On denials that any beliefs exist at all, see Ramsey (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Defending Bortolotti (2009), Bortolotti (2012, p. 39) encourages discussions of delusions and of beliefs more generally to follow recent psychological literature in accepting that “beliefs are often badly integrated with other beliefs, unsupported by evidence, resistant to change, and behaviourally inefficacious.” My argument is broadly in line with hers, though I do not take a stand on delusions in particular. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. This discussion of our puzzlement is not meant as an argument for any conclusion about the rationality of akratic belief, or as a characterization of ways in which an akratic believer might herself experience puzzlement. I mean only to suggest some ways in which one might naturally find akratic belief puzzling, while resisting the conclusion that it is impossible. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. For discussion of the relative “ease” of akratic action, see Pears (1982). Since Pears proceeds by considering particular theories of action, I leave out the details here. But it is interesting to note that Pears combines, and perhaps confuses, intuitions of impossibility and of difficulty when he writes that motivated, “full-blown” akratic belief is “scarcely” or “only marginally possible” (pp. 44,46,49,50). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. The project of spelling this out is large, and would be controversial, in part because, on some theories, intentions are themselves beliefs; see, for example, Velleman (1989) and Setiya (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)