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Agency and the Attitudes: Responsibility through Reasoning

Abstract

What makes us responsible for our attitudes of belief and intention? Since intentional action is the primary route to responsibility, this is a pressing question not only for ethics but also for the philosophy of action. Contra many recent treatments of this question, we do not arrive at our attitudes by executing prior intentions to believe and intend just as we do; forming a belief or an intention is not a matter of bringing one's own mind into accord with some prior intention. Rather, responsibility for the attitudes is grounded in a thinker's inferring to a conclusion. Inferring to a conclusion manifests intentional agency in virtue of a distinctive form of self-consciousness, one that renders premise-conclusion relations in a thinker's conscious stream of thought. Such an action-theoretic account of inferring explains not only why we are subject to normative demands for justification for our attitudes, but also how our responsibility for ordinary bodily action stems from our beliefs and intentions.