

## Self-belief and Agency

Nick Zangwill

*University of Hull*

I argue for the view that we all believe that we exist from the fact that the belief is a presupposition of some of our mental life. We cannot argue from perceptual experience, but we can argue from action. I defend an essentially active (or perhaps “existentialist”) view of the self, and I argue that acting (but not perceiving) presupposes the belief that I exist.

Keywords: belief, self, action, normativity, propositional attitudes

Do we believe we exist? By this I mean to ask about the belief that we would each express by saying “I exist.” In this sense, you believe you exist, and the Queen believes that she exists. Why think that ordinary human beings (rather than philosophers, who may be anomalous), believe they exist? Some might say that the belief that we exist is a fundamental belief that we all have if we have any beliefs. Others might say that ascribing such a belief to ordinary folk is ascribing too much sophistication. I shall argue that we do all believe that we exist. This belief is rarely at the forefront of our consciousness. It is a background or “tacit” belief. But it is a belief nonetheless.

The question of self-belief — of whether or not we believe we exist — is intrinsically interesting. However, one might also have ulterior motives for addressing it. One ulterior motive might be that showing that we believe we exist is part of showing that we *know* we exist. The question of whether we believe we exist is less familiar than the question of whether we know we exist, even though the latter presupposes the former. But if the latter is important, so is the former. Knowing we exist depends in part on believing we exist (Zangwill, 2013b). So the issue of whether we believe we exist is philosophically important. Furthermore, if, in

---

Many thanks to audiences for discussions at the University of Connecticut, Tel Aviv University, Ohio State University, and Ritsumeikan University. Correspondence should be addressed to Nick Zangwill, Ph.D., Philosophy Department, University of Hull, Kingston-upon-Hull, HU6 7RX, United Kingdom. Email: [nick.zangwill@hull.ac.uk](mailto:nick.zangwill@hull.ac.uk)

showing that we believe we exist we posit a connection between existing and believing we exist, then that could be part of an explanation of how we know we exist, and it would cast light on what is distinctive about the way we know we exist.<sup>1</sup>

As we shall see, it turns out that this question — of whether human beings believe of themselves that they exist — raises interesting general issues about propositional attitudes. It raises the issue of how beliefs differ from other propositional attitudes. It raises issues about the contents of perceptual experiences and intentions. And it raises issues about the normative properties of beliefs, and the active power of the mind. In particular, I shall argue that it is only when we consider normativity that we can make progress with the question of whether we believe we exist.

In the first section of this paper I pursue perhaps the most natural line of thought, which is to appeal to our beliefs about perceptions and actions as the source of our belief in our existence. This does not succeed. In the second section I pursue an appeal to the normative properties of the belief that I exist, which does better but still falls short. The third section introduces the idea of agent causation and argues that given normative properties constitutive of agency, we must believe that we exist.

### **Perceptual and Action Beliefs and Tacitly Believing We Exist**

#### *Existing Without Believing One Does*

Many belief ascriptions are controversial. When we are not thinking about it, do we believe that the earth has existed in the last five minutes? Do we, when not thinking about it, believe that there are no elephants in the room? Do we, when not thinking about it, have beliefs about what our names are? Do we, when not thinking about it, believe that *p* and not-*p* cannot both be true? On the one hand, we want to say “yes” insofar as these things are obvious presuppositions of many other things that we believe. On the other hand, we want to say “no” or “not sure” because it is not clear that these assumptions and presuppositions have psychological reality. Most people are not consciously aware of having such beliefs, and it seems over-intellectualizing to ascribe such beliefs to ordinary people. I will argue that the belief that I exist does have psychological reality.

One not implausible idea is that having any propositional attitude necessarily generates a tacit belief that we exist. (I focus on propositional attitudes among other intentional states, because the belief that I exist is a propositional attitude.) A tacit belief is one we are not consciously aware of; nevertheless, it is a psychological state, not a mere disposition to have a psychological state. The idea is that if we have any propositional attitudes, then we tacitly believe we exist. Those in a coma,

---

<sup>1</sup>I have pursued this elsewhere; see Zangwill, 2013a.

a dreamless sleep, or knocked unconscious have no propositional attitudes at that time. But those who have propositional attitudes — those who are not in a coma or a dreamless sleep, or who have not been knocked unconscious — at least tacitly believe that they exist. It is true that most of the time, we are consciously thinking about other things, not our own existence. We might even have been brainwashed by a Non-Existence Cult, all of whose members believe they do not exist because their guru tells them so. Still, the victims of the guru also believe they exist.

There is a well-known general difficulty about appealing to tacit beliefs — which is that it is too easy to posit them when it is theoretically convenient, when in fact they have no psychological reality. Is it really true that all people, at all times, who are thinking something, tacitly believe that they exist? It is not clear exactly what the restrictions are on positing tacit beliefs. We should not say that we believe all the logical consequences of what we believe. But we do believe *some* of them. The question is: Why should we believe that “I exist” is one of the things we tacitly believe, rather than merely being entailed by things I believe? The idea would have to be that the belief that I exist is a presupposition (as opposed to an implication) of much else that I believe. A presupposition of a belief is another belief that I must have in order to have the first belief, as opposed to something merely entailed by what I believe. The idea is that I must believe I exist if I think anything. However, this can be denied. It seems that I could think about pure mathematics quite happily without thinking about my existence or even presupposing it. At certain times, it might be that all that occupies the content of my thoughts is numbers, sets, and the relations between them.

I take it that beliefs cannot just *be* dispositions to have some (other?) mental states. A belief is a mental state, not a disposition to have a mental state, just as a dog is not a potential dog. Beliefs may generate dispositions to have various mental states, but the theory that some propositional attitudes are just dispositions to have propositional attitudes is particularly implausible. A belief, for example, is a real categorical mental fact about a person; it is not like solubility, which means that something would dissolve in certain circumstances. Believing something is not such an insubstantial non-actual fact about a person. To say this does not imply that all beliefs are conscious. Being an *implicit* belief is quite different from being a disposition to believe. Compare an implicit bias. This is not some non-actual state of the world waiting to be made actual in the right circumstances. Instead an implicit bias is an actual state waiting to manifest itself in various ways because of the actually existing bias. The bias has actual psychological reality, although we may not be conscious of it. Furthermore, a purely dispositional conception of mental states is objectionable because we will end up having huge numbers of incompatible mental states. In some circumstances, I would believe *p*; but in certain other circumstances I would believe not-*p*. So, do I believe both? The truth is that the view of tacit belief as a mere disposition to have propositional attitudes is implausible. Hence I ignore this view below.

*Propositional Attitudes, Perceptual Beliefs, Action Beliefs, and Reasoning*

Let us now explore the idea that although the belief that I exist is not an inevitable tacit belief of anyone who has propositional attitudes, it is a likely one, given particular types of propositional attitudes that we are likely to have. First consider the idea that the propositional attitudes that presuppose the belief that I exist are *perceptual beliefs*. I take perceptual beliefs to be indexical or demonstrative beliefs arrived at on the basis of perceptual experiences with the same content. An example would be the belief that there is a green tree in front of me that I have because I had an experience of a green tree in front of me. Perceptual beliefs presuppose beliefs about my location with respect to other things. For example, if I believe that the tree is over there as a result of perceptual experience, then I must have some awareness of the tree's location with respect to me if the idea of "over there" means anything to me. I must have a tacit belief about where the tree is, at least with respect to me. But this means that I have beliefs about where *I* am, at least with respect to the tree. And surely — the argument goes — if I have a tacit belief about *where* I am, then I must have a tacit belief *that* I am. So it is not merely that the fact that I exist is logically or analytically entailed by the truth of other things I believe. Rather, the belief that I exist is presupposed by perceptual beliefs; if we did not have the tacit belief that we exist, we could not have perceptual beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

Let us next consider beliefs about action. Perhaps they also presuppose the belief that I exist. The sub-class of action beliefs that we are interested in are indexical ones. They have the form "I am doing this now." For example, an action belief might be that I am turning *this* wheel — that I am moving *my* arm from *here* to *there*, achieving *this* result. Or perhaps the belief is that I am striving to bring about a certain result. As with perceptual beliefs, if I represent myself as doing something, I must have some awareness of my own location, at least in relation to what I think of myself as achieving. For I think of myself as achieving a result in a world distinct from me. So, again, I must have a tacit belief about where I am in that world, and about what I am achieving, and therefore I must also have a tacit belief that I exist.

Perhaps it is barely possible to be a person with no perceptual and action beliefs, or even perceptual appearances or tryings, and just think about mathematics. If so, I would not even tacitly believe that I exist. I would have mathematical thoughts without having the belief that I exist. But it seems pretty obvious that this is very unlikely. So: given that I have a normal mental life, one that involves perceptual and action beliefs, if I exist I will believe it. It is not logically or metaphysically necessary that if I exist, I will believe it. Nevertheless, if I exist and have a normal mental life, I will also believe that I exist.

---

<sup>2</sup>I note that the issue in question is distinct from the issue discussed under the label "the immunity to error by misidentification."

It might be argued that reasoning is a mental act that tacitly involves the belief that I exist, since reasoning means keeping track of one's beliefs (or other intentional states) and also mentally acting on them so as to generate new beliefs (or other intentional states). Perhaps reasoning involves self-consciousness of my belief system, and this self-consciousness presupposes the belief that I exist. For I am aware that I have certain beliefs, and that I should change them in various ways. Perhaps being an agent in my own mental realm means being committed to an I who is acting. If we exist we are very likely to engage in reasoning; and reasoners have a tacit belief that they exist. However, the argument from reasoning is less decisive than the case from perception and action, even though the argument case would be more general because even a purely mathematical thinker would be a reasoner. The argument is less decisive because it is not obvious whether the content of the thoughts one has when reasoning always involves one's own propositional attitudes. So although reasoning may be a kind of mental action, we do not yet have reason to think that it presupposes the belief that I exist. And it is not clear that reasoning about non-propositional attitude subject matters presupposes awareness of one's propositional attitudes about those subject matters. It is at least controversial. The case of reasoning differs from that of perceptual and action beliefs because it does not involve the idea of a world distinct from myself to which I am perceptually sensitive or on which I am acting. What is significant about perceptual and action beliefs is that, unlike the case of reasoning, perceptual and action beliefs have distinctive contents: in some way they both involve an indexical reference to myself, as well as a demonstrative reference to something distinct from me that I perceive or affect, plus the representation of the spatial relation between me and that distinct thing. The argument is that this content reveals the tacit belief in my own existence.

### *Three Objections to the Above Argument*

The argument has intuitive appeal, but it is subject to at least three objections. One objection is that perceptual beliefs are *relational* beliefs about my location with respect to other things, not *monadic* beliefs in my existence. And action beliefs are relational beliefs about the relation between me and the result that I am striving to bring about, not monadic beliefs in my existence.<sup>3</sup> Having relational perception and action beliefs does not seem to make it necessary that I have monadic beliefs about myself. I want to argue that if I believe that a snake is in front of me, then not only must I exist for it to be in front of me, but I must

---

<sup>3</sup>I assume that to believe that something exists is not to believe that it stands in relation to some thing, event, concept, or property; instead, if a thing stands in relation to some thing, event, concept, or property, it is because it exists.

believe I exist, that the snake exists, and that the snake is in front of me. However, my opponent will object that if I believe something, it does not in general follow that I believe the necessary conditions of the truth of my belief; and the mere fact that my existence is a necessary condition of the truth of my relational belief that there is a snake in front of me does not entail that I believe I exist, only that I do exist. It might also be said that I can believe I am in danger without believing that I exist. Of course, if I reflected, I could be led to see that my existence is a necessary presupposition of my belief, and so I would believe it; but my opponent will deny that I need to believe it. A possible reply to my opponent would be this: although it is true that having beliefs does not imply believing all their logical consequences, the difference, in our case, is that I believe that a certain spatial relation holds between me and something else, and it is generally true that if I believe that a relation holds, then I believe that the relata exist. For example, if I believe that Socrates is taller than Theatetus, then I will believe that both Socrates and Theatetus exist, and that they stand in a certain relation to each other. Otherwise, the relational belief about Socrates and Theatetus would not have the content that it does. Similarly, if I believe that a snake is in front of me, then I must believe that the snake exists, that I exist, and that we stand in a certain relation to each other. However, my opponent will reply that this does not follow because it is not clear that the general claim about beliefs about relations holds. It is true that  $xRy$  and  $Fx$  each entail  $x$  exists. But it is not obvious that believing  $xRy$  or believing  $Fx$  also entail believing  $x$  exists. We do not necessarily believe even obvious logical consequences of what we believe. So the mere fact that I perceptually represent things as being in front of me, and I believe things on that basis, does not establish that it is likely that I believe that I exist. It might be an implication of what I believe without being something I believe.<sup>4</sup>

A second objection is that while it may be the case that those with perceptual and action beliefs must somehow *represent* their existence, they need not go as far as *believing* that they exist. I cast the argument in terms of perceptual and action beliefs rather than in terms of perceptual experiences and acts of will (or

---

<sup>4</sup>An issue, which is perhaps the opposite of the issue we have been discussing, has been pursued by John Campbell. He claims, firstly, that there could be beings who had what he calls “monadic” but not “relational” spatial perceptual contents, in the sense that their perceptual contents are merely [Such and such is to-the-left...] not [Such and such is to-the-left-of-me] (Campbell, 1994, p. 119). Campbell also claims that our actual visual experience is like this. He advances no empirical evidence for this second claim (so far as I can see), nor does he offer any other reason for it. Perhaps such a reduced level of perceptual content is possible. Some animals may be like this. But we humans are more sophisticated. In perceptual experience, I represent things as standing in relation to me. I represent things as in front of me, to the right of me, and so on. Human beings have indexical relational perceptual contents (McGinn, 1982). And these indexical relational perceptual contents ground relational beliefs about my relation to external things. However, the fact that we humans have indexical relational perceptual contents does not help to show what we are interested in, which is that indexical relational perceptual beliefs presuppose the monadic belief that I exist.

strivings). I did this because I worried that it may not be true that the belief that I exist is tacitly presupposed by perceptual experiences or acts of will themselves. A perceptual experience represents a table as being over there, and an act of will represents objects distinct from me as things I am aiming to change or as results I am aiming to bring about. Such experiences and willings may involve representing my existence. But do those experiences and willings themselves presuppose beliefs in my existence? Perhaps not. My reason for casting the argument in terms of perceptual and action beliefs, rather than in terms of perceptual experiences or acts of will themselves, is that it is easier to see how one belief presupposes another belief, as opposed to seeing how an experience or act of will presupposes a belief. However, no sooner do we explicitly state this motivation for the restriction of the argument than the problem even with this restricted argument comes into view: it may be that perceptual or action beliefs presuppose only some kind of representation of my existence, which falls short of belief. And it could be that we merely have a disposition to believe we exist, which is not any kind of actual representation of my existence.

A third objection arises from animals and babies. Do dogs believe they exist? Do babies? It seems to over-intellectualize the dog's and the baby's mental lives to say that they believe they exist. Yet dogs and babies have perceptual experiences and they do things. And it could be that they also have perceptual and action beliefs. If dogs and babies have perceptual experiences and acts of will, or have perceptual and actions beliefs, without the belief that they exist, then the above presupposition argument is threatened. Many will say that when a dog digs up a bone, it is because he believes he buried a bone somewhere; and many will say that when babies reach for toys, it is because they believe there are toys in front of them. Dogs and babies do all that quite happily without believing they exist. They may have other beliefs, but not sophisticated beliefs like that. Furthermore, someone might deny that dogs and babies have perceptual and action beliefs in addition to having perceptual experiences and acts of will. It might be conceded that once children get to the developmental stage when they attain perceptual and actions beliefs, then they have the belief that they exist. But before that, it might be claimed that babies, like dogs, have perceptual experiences and willings with representational content but without the corresponding beliefs. According to this line of thought, dogs and babies get around with representational states that are not relational beliefs about their environment.<sup>5</sup> Whether or not animals and babies have perceptual and action beliefs as well as having perceptual experiences and doing things, they surely do not believe they exist. So it seems that our believing we exist is not a consequence merely of the fact that we have

---

<sup>5</sup>There are some experimental developmental findings that suggest a separation of two phases in child development — a phase that does not involve self-location in an environment and a phase that does (Baker, 2000, chapter 2).

perceptual and action beliefs or of the fact that we have perceptual experiences and acts of will.<sup>6</sup>

### Normativity, Belief, and Action

#### *Distinctive Norms*

We need a different approach. Despite the complexity of the arguments, the underlying question is quite simple. Do people believe that they exist? It may not cross their minds while shopping. But they may believe it nonetheless — a tacit belief. It is also true that there are many people who, while shopping, believe that Brasilia is the capital of Brazil. But I think that those people do nevertheless believe that Brasilia is the capital of Brazil even when they are not thinking about it. Believing I exist is like that, in my view, although, thus far, we have seen no reason to believe this.

The claim is that normal people believe they exist, as opposed to merely believing that they stand in relation to other things, or representing their existence in some other way, without believing it, or having a disposition to believe they exist in certain circumstances, without representing their existence at all. What is at stake here? At this point, to make progress, we face various difficulties. The central difficulty is the huge one of saying what it is to believe something as opposed to having some other kind of attitude to it, such as imagining it. Since Hume posed the problem two and a half centuries ago, there has been little progress.<sup>7</sup>

One promising approach is to appeal to normative properties of belief. The idea would be that propositional attitudes have essential normative properties (Zangwill, 1998, 2005, 2010). This falls short of being a complete account of the natures or constitutive essences of propositional attitudes, but it helps us nonetheless. The view — to increase the fineness of focus — is that propositional attitude kinds have normative properties that distinguish those kinds from other propositional attitude kinds. The particular norms that I have in mind are rational norms (as opposed to alleged norms concerning truth). These rational norms I call *horizontal* norms, since they link propositional attitudes to other propositional attitudes: some propositional attitudes rationalise others.

---

<sup>6</sup>There is well-known research on the sense of self in babies and in apes that investigates the extent to which they can recognize themselves in mirrors (Gallup, Jr., 1970). [There has been less success with monkeys.] But that babies and apes can represent themselves, does not mean that they believe that they exist. They may find out certain further facts about themselves from mirror reflections. But that does not mean that they believe they exist, only that they represent themselves and have beliefs about themselves. Recall that believing  $xRy$  or believing  $Fx$  do not entail believing that  $x$  exists. Maybe we are usually like apes.

<sup>7</sup>“Functionalist” accounts of believing were once popular; but my view is that such accounts are not plausible and are subject to powerful objections. I have not space to defend this here; but see Zangwill, 1998, 2006.



This helps with our question over the belief that I exist. If we can state some rational norms that are distinctive of beliefs, as opposed to other kinds of propositional attitudes, and we can see that we instantiate those norms when we represent our existence, then that would be a reason to believe that this representation amounts to the belief that we exist. Furthermore, if the norms would not be instantiated by relational beliefs, or by dispositions to believe, then the norms also rule out these options. The rational norms to which we can appeal in the case of the belief that I exist are: (a) it is rational to infer the belief that I exist from other beliefs; (b) it is rational to infer certain other beliefs from the belief that I exist; (c) other sorts of propositional attitudes, apart from beliefs, rationalise acquiring the belief that I exist; and (d) the belief that I exist rationalises acquiring other kinds of propositional attitudes, apart from beliefs.

There are other accounts of belief. There are non-normative accounts, such as functionalism. And there are normative accounts, such as those that take truth to be the norm for beliefs (Boghossian, 2008). However, as we shall see, the normative account that appeals to rationality has the resources to distinguish believing I exist from relational beliefs, from the disposition to believe I exist, and from other representational states with that content.

### *Evasive Action and the Belief that I Exist*

Consider the phenomenon of evasive action. Suppose I have the perceptual experience of something heading towards me — that is, I perceive something as coming right at me. Perhaps I am walking and suddenly I see a bird flying at my head, or perhaps I am driving and suddenly a car appears in front of me, heading towards me. Presumably I don't want to be hit. Now, surely, the propositional attitudes that I have, whatever they are, make it rational for me to take evasive action, such as ducking my head or swerving the car. But if so — I will argue — I must have the belief that I exist. Without such a belief, ducking or swerving would be irrational.

Why should we believe this normative claim? Evasive action would be irrational if I somehow believed that I did not exist! But is it irrational if I simply fail to believe I exist? That is the question. What we need to show is that no mental state other than a belief in my existence will do. The (relational) belief that something is heading towards me will not suffice. A non-belief kind of representation (such as imagination) will not suffice. And neither will a mere disposition to believe. The claim is that evasive action is rational only if I believe that I exist.

By contrast with evasive actions, consider what are called perceptual “looming phenomena” in babies and animals. These cases have been the subject of empirical research (Schiff, Caviness, and Gibson, 1962). Most of the phenomena of looming that have been investigated concern instinctive reflexes. By contrast, only when ducking or swerving are voluntary or intentional actions do they presuppose

self-belief. Perhaps one can duck as a mere reflex, a response to a looming stimulus, in the way that one blinks when something quickly approaches one's eyes. But the cases I have in mind are intentional actions. The research on perceptual looming phenomena in babies and animals shows how they often react to looming stimuli. But I think that they are not intentionally acting on the basis of perceptual beliefs. So, we need not be worried about looming phenomena.

The claim is: if I have a perceptual experience of something coming at me, and if I then take evasive action and I am rational to do so, then I must have the monadic belief that I exist. Consider that a court of law can hold me accountable for evasive action. I might not have time to think. But in a court case, I might be asked "Why did you swerve your car?" and the answer might be "Because I saw a car coming right at me." Swerving or ducking are often fully intentional actions. They can also be things one "does" automatically, without any reasons, like blinking. But I am interested in cases where they are fully intentional actions, as blinking sometimes is. However, if I deliberately swerve my car because of what I saw, such that what I saw warrants swerving, then not only must I represent my own location but I must also believe in my own existence.<sup>8</sup>

### *Dispositional Belief and Relational Belief*

One contrast that is normatively important is that between belief and imagination. Consider a case where I am watching a horror film, perhaps a 3-D film; and in the film something scary appears to come towards me in the audience. Then while it might be understandable that I duck, it is not rational action. Taking evasive action is pointless if nothing is actually heading towards me. I must really believe that something is coming towards me, as opposed to merely imagining it, if evasive action is rationalized.

What about the contrast between relational indexical beliefs and the monadic belief that I exist. This is more complex. When a bird flies at my head, I deliberately duck. But what, exactly, is it, to duck? Well, to duck deliberately is to move my body from one place to another. So I must have a belief about these two places: about where the bird is and will be, and about where I am and will be. But if I have a belief about where I am and where I will be, is it the case that I must also believe that I am (now) and will be (soon)? I perceive and believe on that basis that a bird is flying at me. Given my desires, it is rational to duck. But why exactly? It is rational to duck because when I duck I am intentionally changing my location so that the bird does not hit me, something that I do not want to happen. Thus, I must have beliefs about where I am and about what would happen to me if I did

---

<sup>8</sup>An analysis of existence claims as relational claims is not plausible (see McGinn, 2002). To believe I exist is not to believe that I instantiate some property — besides that of existence if it is a property — even though if something exists then it must instantiate some (other) property.

not move, and about where I would be and what would and would not happen to me if I did move.

Unfortunately, while this may encourage the idea that if it is rational to duck then I must believe I exist, it does not firmly establish that idea. Perhaps relational beliefs about myself will do. Perhaps all I need is that the thought “It is coming towards me” or “I had better get out of its way.” Such relational beliefs, it might be argued, suffice to rationalise evasive action. And if so, we do not need the monadic belief that I exist.<sup>9</sup>

### **Intention and Causation and Believing in Yourself**

#### *Perception/Action Asymmetries*

The appeal to normativity has helped make to some progress, but not enough. I have not yet proved that we believe we exist, since all that might be needed for action and perception are indexical relational beliefs. To go further, I will focus on certain peculiarities of action and intention, in contrast with perception.<sup>10</sup>

The content of intentional action contrasts with the content of perceptual experience in a significant way. In perceptual experience, I represent things like flowers, trees, and birds, and also their relation to me. But I do not (in most cases) represent myself in my experience as an object. The self is not (in most cases) an item in the visual field. Intending and intentional action are different precisely in this respect. The content of an intention is distinctively represented in English: we say that we have the intention *to* A. Call that an “infinitive intention.” These infinitive intentions can, with a little stretch, be redescribed propositionally, as the intention *that* p. The content of these propositions necessarily contains an

---

<sup>9</sup>Bill Brewer has argued that “self-location” depends on agency. Self-location is, I presume, a matter of having relational indexical spatial beliefs rather than the monadic existence belief that I am concerned with. Brewer claims that self-location only arises where there is a combination of perception plus action, because having self-locating beliefs or knowledge depends on the special responsiveness of my body to my will (Brewer, 1992). His view is that it is this practical role of perception that makes self-location beliefs or knowledge possible. To some extent, I am not unsympathetic with this. However, even if such an argument succeeds, it is not enough to show that we have a monadic existence belief. Furthermore, Brewer’s idea that we can self-locate because of the intertwining of perception and action in practical reasoning seems to get matters the wrong way around. The intertwining of perception and action — their fitting together in practical reason — is possible because we self-locate. If we had no idea where we are in a wider “objective” space and time, our perceptions and actions would not fit together. The possibility of perception–action union depends on self-location.

<sup>10</sup>I presume that intentions are a distinctive kind of practical state, which we may form (rationally) on the basis of practical deliberation, and which may be a (rational) prelude to decision and action. Thus, intentions are not a kind of belief since beliefs and intentions have radically different normative properties. Of course, we may act intentionally, without previous deliberation, but in that case it is even clearer than the intention that is constitutive of action is not a belief.

indexical — it is the intention that *I* do something. Intentions typically have an *I* content in ways that perceptions do not.<sup>11</sup> Both perceptual experiences and intentions can be propositional and non-propositional: we can perceive that *p* and intend that *p*, and we can also intend to *F* and perceive *X*. But intentions may be described in English in a propositional way that makes their indexicality explicit.

Intentions must have *I*-content. I perceive that something is the case but I do not (or hardly ever) perceive that I am such and such in the way that I do standardly intend that I such and such. I intend that I bring something about. This is important, since it means that the argument from intention and action to the tacit belief that I exist is stronger than the argument from perception. Note also that indexical intentions are had even by exclusively mathematical thinkers, since they reason about mathematical matters, and reasoning is a form of mental action. This point carries us forward towards our conclusion; but in order to drive it home, more argument is necessary.

### *Animals and Babies*

One objection to this view of intention is that it is over-sophisticated. Someone might complain that although *some* intentions are indexical, dogs and babies act intentionally without indexical content. If so, then it seems that some of our actions are likely to be similar (see Hume's "Of the Reason of Animals"; in Hume, 1742/2000, book I, section XVI). Perhaps dogs and babies have infinitive intentions without propositional intentions. The reply to this is that *we* (dear readers) are not dogs and babies. *We* have many full-blown intentions with sophisticated indexical contents. And having those requires that we believe we exist — or so I argue. If we also have thinner animal-like intentions, that does not jeopardise the argument. For a fully functioning human being also has thicker, full-blooded, indexical propositional intentions. Perhaps there are some infinitive intentions that have no indexically propositional description. However, most do. Most intentions of adult human beings that are infinitively describable are also indexically propositionally describable.

### *Relational Content and the Self as Cause*

One way of describing Harman's point would be to say that the self is not an item in our perceptual field (not normally at any rate, unless we are looking in the mirror); but the self *is* always an item in the intentional field. The self is represented in the content of every intention — whereas this is not true of perceptual experiences.

---

<sup>11</sup>Gilbert Harman made this point in an important paper (Harman, 1976; and see Roth, 2000 for discussion).

I now return to the objection that relational indexical intentions might suffice for rational action. I noted that believing that a relation holds between two or more things does not entail believing that the relata exist. In particular, perceiving that something is in front of me does not obviously entail believing that it exists and that I exist. I conceded that. The objector might continue: even if intentions have propositional indexical content, that propositional indexical content might be non-monadic relational content. So it seems that not all agents have the monadic belief that they exist. However, Harman's point helps us in that direction.

We need to ask: *Why* does the Harman point hold? There is an explanation of the fact that intentions necessarily have indexical content. This explanation shows that we believe we exist. The point that I want to urge — in order to meet the objection that mature human action depends only on beliefs or intentions with relational indexical content, as opposed to the monadic representation of my existence — is that what I believe about myself when I act or intend to act is that I am or can be a *cause*. To act or to intend to act is in part to believe this. To put it another way, when I act, not only do I have the power to act, and I act from that power, I also believe I have the power to act, and I believe that I act out of that power. But, the argument will be that I cannot reasonably believe that I have that power without having the monadic belief that I exist.

I am an agent, not a patient. I think of myself as causing one state of the world rather than another. If I will, I will one thing rather than another. If so, I must have a view about the causal structure of the world in those respects, and I see myself as making the difference — as initiating one chain of events rather than another. I cause this rather than that, and I am aware of that (Sartre, 1943/1984, pp. 433–437 makes exactly this point). But if I know I can make a difference, I know that this is because I have the power or capacity to do so. *I* am the locus of this power; the power is in me. And my active power depends on that knowledge.

To believe I have power is not merely to believe that I stand in actual relations to something else; it is in part to have beliefs about various counterfactuals: if I do not duck, this will happen; if I do duck, that will happen. This is part of what it is to intend such and such effects rather than others, since intending to act means having causal beliefs, and those causal beliefs ground belief in the counterfactuals. I believe that I have the power to change the world; and the counterfactuals have their source in that power.

But why, exactly, does believing in my own power, and accepting the counterfactuals that are consequential on that power, mean believing I exist? The answer is that I believe that I am the *source* of power or capacity to change the world. When I act, the change is due to me. I cause it; and I believe that. The action has its source in the self; and in acting, I believe that. This, I think, commits agents to the existence of the self as the bearer of these causal properties, which are not just causal relations but causal powers or capacities.

*Cause and Existence*

Since Sydney Shoemaker's work on causation (Shoemaker, 1984), philosophers have by and large taken on board the idea that the properties of things make a difference to the causal relations in which they stand. (This point remains good even if we do not go as far as Shoemaker in identifying properties with clusters of causal powers.) However, an object, such as a brick, can break a window, even if it does so in virtue of some of its properties rather than others (Whittle, 2016). The brick, itself, remains a cause. Similarly, the self itself can be a cause. Although the self may sometimes be a cause in virtue of some of its properties, that does not mean that the mental states or acts of a self are always due to other mental states or acts of that self. Some mental states or acts of the self may be directly due to the self. In willing or reasoning, the self itself is the source of its own acts of will or reasoning. This is what is known as an "agent causation" account; but it does not imply libertarian free will — one can be a compatibilist agent causation theorist (see Markosian, 1999, 2012).

However, such an agent causation view makes no sense without self-belief because of the dependence of the actual power of the self on *beliefs* about powers of the self. The powers are relational, but they are grounded in the self, and we believe that the powers derive from the self. That is part of what it is to act, decide or reason.

When I act, I must believe that I have power, the power to change the world or my mind. Merely having power, but not believing I have it, is not enough. For the point of acting is *knowingly* to be the cause of this rather than that. I am intentionally making a difference in the world. But this means believing that the ensuing difference in the world has its source in me. I conceive of myself as a cause. So, if I act, reason or decide, I must believe that I am the cause. I believe that I did it, and that it happened because of me.

This means that in order to act, I must not only have the concept of the self but also the concept of causation — at least for a full human action, not what animals and babies do (see further Korsgaard, 2009). We must have the concept of the self, of the I who acts, which is the author of actions, and we must conceive of the causal powers of that self. Mental action, then, is quite sophisticated. It is "reflective" in a broadly Kantian sense.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup>I endorse much of what Korsgaard says about the animal/human contrast, but not everything. She claims that animals strive to retain their identity or reproduce themselves (Korsgaard, 2009). But this seems overly individualist. Members of groups of animals sometimes engage in behaviour that signals predators where that does not contribute to an individual animal retaining its identity or reproducing. In this respect, as in many others, the biological understanding of animals has moved on more than a little since Aristotle, on whom Korsgaard draws. Nevertheless, I have learned much from Korsgaard's Kantian conception of human action.

*Only Relational Indexical Content*

We have not quite arrived at the conclusion that mental action requires that the concept of the self figures in *monadic* contents. Might a relational indexical belief do? Might I just think: I-will-cause-X or I-can-cause-X or I-have-power-to-cause-X or I-am-causing-X? Perhaps these suffice. But the argument is that acting, deciding, or reasoning means causing a change knowingly — acting self-reflectively out of a *power* or *capacity* to bring about a change. It is this knowing or self-reflective aspect of mental action that means that we believe in the existence of the self.

Is the point constitutive or normative? In the normative mode, the point is this. If my mental actions of forming intentions or beliefs are rational, I believe myself to be their cause. But if I believe myself to be the cause of some effect when I act, decide, or reason, then that would be irrational unless I believed that I existed. For it is obvious that if I am a cause, I exist. Hence the rationality of action, decision, and reasoning requires that I believe that I exist. We need the belief that I exist: imagining I exist, will not do; the belief that I stand in some relation will not do; nor will a disposition to believe I exist do. None of these suffices to rationalize mental actions of decision or reasoning. It has to be the monadic belief that I exist. Why exactly? It would obviously be irrational to will something and think that I caused it if I believed that I did *not* exist. But why does rationally willing something require believing I exist? It is because I exercise the power knowingly or self-reflectively. How can I believe in the power of the self unless I believe in the self? Lacking that monadic existence belief in myself would make believing in the power of the self, and knowingly exercising that power, irrational. Therefore, rational willing means believing I exist, since rational willing (as opposed to random whims) is our usual state. Most adult human beings, therefore, believe they exist.

In the constitutive mode, the point would be that in acting, I must believe myself to be initiating a certain change and also that I am the source of that change. And to believe that I have that causal property, I must believe that I exist. Hence if I experience or believe that something is coming towards me *and* I deliberately *and* warrantedly duck in order to avoid it, then I must believe that both relata of this relation exist. But this constitutional scenario seems too strong. It is rational to believe I exist if I duck. But I might not be rational. If so, I would not believe I exist, and the constitutive claim is false. I concede that it is metaphysically possible to have relational indexical contents without monadic indexical contents; but that does not make it likely. It is likely that if people believe that a relation holds then they believe that its relata exist. The reason it is unlikely is that they would have to be irrational not to believe it. This is sufficient to vindicate the conditional “If I exist then I believe I do”; for that conditional can obtain even though there are metaphysical possibilities in which I am irrational and I exist but do not believe it.

### *Three Comments*

Firstly, I make no further claims about the nature of the self here on the basis of this argument. Descartes, of course, believed that the self is a simple substance. My claim is just that it exists, we believe in it, and that it has an active nature, whatever else may be true of it. I assume that Lichtenbergian/Humean unowned willings are not possible; willings, like all mental states and acts, must be had or done by persons. In this paper, I do not take seriously the view that there is no self. It is surely not very controversial to assert that there cannot be willings without a willer — a person who wills. This ownership principle seems to me to be non-negotiable. The view that there are no selves — that nothing has sensations or propositional attitudes — seems incoherent unless one also denies the existence of sensations and propositional attitudes as well, which is at least consistent (although pragmatic self-defeat threatens; see Zangwill, 2010). But even if we concede its possibility, a Lichtenbergian/Humean being — a collection of unowned mental states — would be entirely passive. There would just be mental causation, perhaps in virtue of mental states and their contents, but no agency (see also Korsgaard, 2009). I assume that mental states are *had* — that the self exists.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps it is in some sense possible that the self is an illusion as Hume and Lichtenberg thought, and if so, there is no agency. Nevertheless, self-belief is a condition of agency.

Secondly, does God believe He exists? If God exists, His actions are free, even though he cannot do otherwise (given His essential nature, as all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good). God's will is thus a "Frankfurt example." So, we should avoid a picture of God deliberating by surveying a number of possibilities and freely choosing to actualize one of them. God lacks alternative possibilities but His freedom is no worse for that (Zangwill, 2012). Nevertheless, self-belief is still a presupposition of God's deliberation and action. For God knows that what He decides and does has its source in Him. God chooses the best and does it deliberately, even though it is necessary that He decides and does what He does. He is nevertheless the cause of His choices and actions and He knows it. Thus God believes He exists. If He is an agent, He must do so.

Thirdly, the view envisaged, whereby the self has an the active power, is not too distant from the idea of the World Soul in Plato's *Timaieus* and in other ancient writings (Plato, 360 BC/1997). The principle of unity and order of the observed cosmos (the solar system) plus the existence of motion needs explaining. Why is there neither chaos nor a motionless world? The presence of a self-moving World Soul explains much. It is a good explanatory posit — or at least it was. We too have such a self-moving soul. The self has the power of self-motion. We change

---

<sup>13</sup>This is one reason (of several) why talk of "representations" in the philosophy of mind or cognitive science is problematic: in the way they are talked of, they seem unowned.



our minds, and we change the world. Perhaps there is no World Soul; and perhaps the order and motion of the world can be otherwise explained. So says modern science. Nevertheless, something like Plato's *Timaeus* view is true of us.

### Coda

With every step that we take, we reaffirm our existence. If you want to change the world, you must believe that you exist, and that you have the power to change the world. "I think therefore I am" was Descartes' Cogito; "I intend therefore I exist" is the more specific active Cogito that I am suggesting. For Descartes, the belief that I exist is warranted by the belief that I think. But for all Descartes has shown, I may not actually have the belief that I exist or the belief that I think. I may be dwelling on Mathematics or absinthe or Galois cigarettes or Queen Elizabeth of Bohemia and not thinking about myself at all. By contrast, the beliefs that we have in acting, deciding, and reasoning force us to believe that we exist in a more immediate way, partly because of the way that the content of intentions, choices, and acts of reasoning are self-referential (as Harman says) but also because of the fact that they are predicated on endowing the self with power. What makes it likely that we believe that the relata of the causal relations exist is not just our belief that there is a relation between the self and something else — it is the specific nature of that relation: we believe not just that we stand in a causal relation but that we stand in a causal relation that has its source and ultimate explanation in one of the relata. For that we must believe in that relata. That is why the Harman point holds.

I do not resist the existentialist resonances of this, indeed I embrace them: consciousness of my existence is thrust upon me in so far as I am an active being. Only in free action is one conscious of one's existence (Sartre, 1943/1984; De Beauvoir, 1947/2004). Not only is one condemned to be free, one is thereby condemned to believe one exists.

### References

- Baker, L. R. (2000). *Persons and bodies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boghossian, P. (2008). Is meaning normative? In P. Boghossian, *Content and justification* (pp. 95–107). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brewer, B. (1992). Self-location and agency. *Mind*, 101, 17–34.
- Campbell, J. (1994). *Past, space and self*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- De Beauvoir, S. (2004). An existentialist looks at America. In *Simone De Beauvoir: Philosophical writings*. Urbana: Illinois University Press. (Originally published in 1947)
- Descartes, R. (1984). *Philosophical writings, volume 2* [J. Cottingham et al., Trans.]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gallup, Jr., G. G. (1970). Chimpanzees: Self-recognition. *Science*, 167, 86–87.
- Harman, G. (1976). Practical reasoning. *Review of Metaphysics*, 29, 431–463.
- Hume, D. (2000). Of the reason of animals. In *Treatise on human nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Originally published in 1742)

- Korsgaard, C. (2009). *Self-constitution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McGinn, C. (1982). *The subjective view*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McGinn, C. (2002). *Logical properties*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Markosian, N. (1999). A compatibilist version of the theory of agent causation. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 80, 257–277.
- Markosian, N. (2012). Agent causation as the solution to all the Compatibilist's problems. *Philosophical Studies*, 157, 383–398.
- Plato. (1997). *Timaeus*. In J. Cooper (Ed.), *Plato: Complete works* (pp. 34b–37c). Indianapolis: Hackett. (Originally published ca. 367 BC)
- Roth, A. (2000). The self-referentiality of intentions. *Philosophical Studies*, 97, 11–52.
- Sartre, J-P. (1984). *Being and nothingness* [H.E. Barnes, Trans.]. New York: Washington Square Press. (Originally published 1943)
- Schiff, W., Caviness, J. A., and Gibson, J. J. (1962). Persistent fear responses in rhesus monkeys to the optical stimulus of 'looming.' *Science*, 136, 982–983.
- Shoemaker, S. (1984). Causality and properties. In S. Shoemaker, *Identity, cause and mind* (pp. 206–233). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Whittle, A. (2016). A defence of substance causation. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 2, 1–20.
- Zangwill, N. (1998). Normative functionalism and direction of fit. *Philosophical Studies*, 91, 173–203.
- Zangwill, N. (2005). The normativity of the mental. *Philosophical Explorations*, 8, 1–20.
- Zangwill, N. (2006). Daydreams and anarchy: A defense of anomalous mental causation. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 73, 253–289.
- Zangwill, N. (2010). Normativity and the metaphysics of mind. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 88, 21–39.
- Zangwill, N. (2011). Negative properties. *Nous*, xlv, 528–556.
- Zangwill, N. (2012). A way out of the Euthyphro dilemma. *Religious Studies*, xlviii, 7–13.
- Zangwill, N. (2013a). A priori knowledge that I exist. *Analytic Philosophy*, 54, 189–208
- Zangwill, N. (2013b). Knowledge and truth. *Analytic Philosophy*, 28, 139–144.