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Making sense of edge beliefs

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ABSTRACT

Miriam Schleifer McCormick argues that the best way to defend doxasticism about edge beliefs is to challenge the standard view of the connection between belief and evidence. While I agree with this general strategy, I deny that we have good reasons to classify belief as an emotion. I argue that the features invoked in support of this classification cannot, on their own, explain the resistance of edge beliefs to counterevidence. Moreover, I contend that the explanatory program succeeds only by appealing to auxiliary hypotheses that are insufficiently grounded in Schleifer McCormick's analysis of belief as emotion and that are vulnerable to independent objections. I illustrate these difficulties by examining some explanations of evidence resistance and Schleifer McCormick's attempts to draw normative distinctions among edge beliefs. I conclude by suggesting that a more promising approach is to analyze evidence sensitivity directly as constitutive of belief, while allowing for flexibility in its manifestations.

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The standard view of belief has come under pressure from putative "edge beliefs," namely, states that resemble beliefs but do not seem to be sufficiently responsive to evidence or are misaligned with a subject's actions.[1] The class of problem cases includes delusions, religious and political convictions, interpersonal trust, the attitudes formed through self-deception, implicit attitudes, and "fringe" beliefs in propositions like <The Earth is flat> or <The Covid-19 pandemic is a hoax>. Unsurprisingly, nondoxasticism has become a thriving industry, with many proposals to recategorize edge beliefs as other kinds of mental states.

Belief as Emotion is a sustained defense of doxasticism about edge beliefs. In this compact but ambitious book, Miriam Schleifer McCormick (SM) contends that standard defenses of doxasticism are ineffective because they uncritically accept the standard view of belief. For SM, a more effective defense should use the data provided by edge beliefs to rethink our

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understanding of belief. We should think of belief as an emotion, a "blended state" that transcends the cognitive/affective dichotomy. If belief is an emotion, so the argument goes, we can understand why edge beliefs bear a complicated relation to evidence and action and draw normative distinctions between different edge beliefs (5, 8, 14, 37–38).

This is an impressive book that covers a broad territory, ranging from epistemology to the philosophies of mind, psychology, psychiatry, and religion. SM masterfully presents complex interconnections among literatures that have developed more or less independently, uncovering shared problematic assumptions and argumentative patterns, and identifying common strategies of response. By conceiving of belief as an emotion, the book also contributes to a recent trend that rejects the picture of beliefs as resulting from "cold" informational processing (96) and of emotions as irrational feelings (140).

I am sympathetic to both doxasticism and SM's emphasis on the centrality of emotions. I am also persuaded by SM's reconstruction of the dialectic between non-doxasticism and doxasticism, as well as by many of her arguments against both non-doxasticism and standard defenses of doxasticism. Nevertheless, I am not yet convinced that we need to construe belief as an emotion in order to defend doxasticism.

The commentary proceeds as follows. In Section 1, I present the Master Argument for non-doxasticism and survey different possible reactions to it. Section 2 reconstructs SM's strategy. Section 3 presents a general worry. In Section 4, I illustrate the general worry with some concrete examples. Section 5 briefly outlines a way forward.

1. The Master Argument

Most philosophers think of belief as a cognitive state, in contrast with conative and affective states (13). Furthermore, they endorse the Standard View:

The standard view

If a psychological state, *S*, is a belief, then:

(1) *S* is essentially connected to evidence.
(2) *S* is essentially connected to action (13).

Condition 1 has been thought to entail that subjects revise their beliefs whenever they are faced with counterevidence (Williams, 1973, p. 137). Condition 2 has been taken to underwrite our abilities "to infer what people

believe from how they act" and to "predict how they will act if we know what they believe" (3). I will discuss condition 1.

SM distinguishes between metaphysical and normative defenses of non-doxasticism (Section 1.2). I shall focus on the former and briefly discuss some normative issues that arise in that context. The metaphysical defense rests on the following argument:

The Master Argument for non-doxasticism

Premise 1. Edge beliefs are not sufficiently responsive to evidence.
Premise 2. If a psychological state, *S*, is not sufficiently responsive to evidence, then *S* is not a belief.
Conclusion. Edge beliefs are not beliefs.

SM disregards "extreme reactions" that treat the debate as a merely verbal dispute (9–13) and sets aside attempts to replace beliefs with credences. I will do the same here. In my view, the dispute is substantive. Our ordinary talk and thought about belief capture explanatorily relevant patterns that are continuous with the scientific study of the mind while reflecting belief's place in our normative practices. Accordingly, non-doxasticism and doxasticism emerge as the two main responses to the Master Argument.

Non-doxasticism accepts the conclusion and uses it to motivate a recategorization of (some) edge beliefs as psychological states of a different kind. Common substitutes include states already present in our ordinary talk and thought, such as imaginings (Currie, 2000; Ichino, 2024) and acceptances (Alston, 1996; Dub, 2015). Sometimes, however, non-doxasticists are more creative and coin new types of psychological states, such as "quasi-beliefs" (Bayne & Hattiangadi, 2013), "besires" (Swartzer, 2013), "states of bi-imagination" (Egan, 2009), "in-between beliefs" (Schwitzgebel, 2013), "fiducial faith" (Audi, 2008), "religious credences" (Leeuwen & Neil, 2023), and "aliefs" (Gendler, 2008).

Although SM offers detailed criticisms of specific forms of non-doxasticism, her most interesting arguments have broad application. First, SM argues that non-doxasticism forces us to revise our ordinary and scientific ways of describing edge beliefs. Second, SM maintains that we need to categorize edge beliefs *as* beliefs; otherwise, we would be unable to assess some of them as irrational. Third, SM contends that non-doxasticism leads to a slippery slope. If insufficient responsiveness to evidence is cited to exclude edge beliefs from the category of belief, then one is committed to excluding many other *bona fide* beliefs from that category as well, including

biased, prejudiced, religious, and political beliefs (4–5, 41–2, 51–3, 60; see also Ganapini, 2020; Helton, 2020).

Standard doxasticism rejects Premise 1 by arguing that edge beliefs are more responsive to evidence than non-doxasticists assume (Bortolotti, 2011; Flores, 2021). Unfortunately, this reply is unlikely to satisfy most non-doxasticists, who will insist that such forms of evidence responsiveness are insufficient for a state to count as a belief (59).

Let us dub *"critical doxasticism"* a form of doxasticism that rejects both non-doxasticism and standard doxasticism. The critical doxasticist treats the behavior of edge beliefs as data to motivate rejecting the Standard View and replacing it with a revised analysis of belief in which the connection with evidence is more complex. Given a different account of what belief is, failures to respond sufficiently to evidence won't provide a strong reason to exclude a state from the category of belief. In this way, critical doxasticism can block Premise 2 of the Master Argument.[2]

2. Belief as emotion

SM wants to explain belief's complex connection with evidence as a *consequence* of the fact that belief is an emotion (15–6). One can distinguish three steps in SM's defense of this claim.

In the first step, SM argues that belief satisfies five features that, according to several leading accounts, characterize emotions (14, 19): (i) beliefs are intentional states (20); (ii) beliefs have a strong link with motivation and action (20–1); (iii) beliefs capture attention (28–9); (iv) all beliefs share the same formal object (21–4); and (v) beliefs feel a certain way (24–8).

Features (i)-(iii) are already present in, or at least consistent with, the Standard View. As such, they do little to motivate a re-analysis of belief. Thus, the key elements are (iv) and (v).

SM maintains that all beliefs share the same formal object, namely *accuracy*. On her view, this accommodates the possibility of having beliefs without propositional content and allows for a form of gradability that is incompatible with the traditional concept of truth. SM also cites and endorses views that construe belief as a favoring attitude and therefore as having a positive evaluative property as its formal object (21–2). This is perhaps one of the least clear arguments in the book. One is left wondering whether accuracy *itself* is a positive evaluative property, or whether it merely correlates, in some contexts, with a positive evaluative property such as goodness.[3]

SM also thinks that there is something it is like to have a belief. This claim is supported by a comparison between belief and acceptance: the phenomenal character of believing p seems to be different from the phenomenal character of hypothesizing, supposing, or merely accepting p (26–30; see

also Cohen, 1992). Once again, the argument here is somewhat quick. One is left wondering whether there are not alternative explanations of this overall phenomenal difference, as one might expect given earlier discussions of phenomenal contrast arguments (Siegel, 2010).[4]

The second step consists in a specific interpretation of these five features. SM uses them to posit a "blended state": belief is a *felt evaluative representation* (40). While its representational aspect tells us something about the world, its felt aspect tells us something about ourselves (2). Notably, neither aspect is more fundamental than the other. Whenever one believes something, one feels that one is representing the world accurately (5). Let us refer to the conjunction of features (i)-(v), as framed by this interpretation, "Belief as Emotion" (BAE).

The third step consists of an inference to the best explanation. Across a series of detailed discussions, SM aims to show how BAE can be put to work to reject Premise 2 of the Master Argument and thereby save doxasticism. More specifically, this step amounts to a defense of the following conditional: If BAE is true, then one can offer a *better* account of edge beliefs than those provided by either non-doxasticism or standard doxasticism.

3. A general worry

SM wants to explain belief's complicated connection with evidence as a *consequence* of BAE. A natural way of assessing the merits of this proposal would be to determine whether its explanatory virtues, on balance, outweigh those of competing proposals. Doing so, however, would require comparing SM's critical doxasticism with a wide range of competing accounts of edge beliefs, a task that lies beyond the scope of this commentary. Instead, I will focus on the explanatory structure of SM's critical doxasticism, identify some explanatory shortcomings, and argue that, *pace* SM (139), they constitute serious theoretical costs that should be taken into account when comparing SM's view with other accounts.

Focusing on BAE, it is difficult to see how categorizing belief as an emotion helps explain edge beliefs' resistance to counterevidence. Moreover, BAE by itself lacks the resources to draw normative distinctions among edge beliefs. After all, BAE is meant to apply to *all* beliefs. Crucially, not all beliefs are resistant to evidence, and not all beliefs are normatively on a par. As a result, BAE can begin to explain edge beliefs only once it is supplemented with a set of 1) observations and assumptions about certain emotions; 2) meta-normative claims; and 3) normative claims. Let us refer to claims of types 1–3 as "auxiliary hypotheses."

My general worry is that BAE and these auxiliary hypotheses are not sufficiently well connected. More specifically, they are logically independent of one another, and the explanatory links between them are missing. As

a result, it is unclear why someone who accepts BAE should expect the psychological kind belief to either include some members that are resistant to counterevidence or to span a normatively heterogenous domain.[5] This situation gives rise to three kinds of difficulty for SM's critical doxasticism.

First, many auxiliary hypotheses are themselves contentious and open to challenge. Given the absence of clear explanatory connections to BAE, one cannot simply appeal to the latter in order to bolster the former.

Second, attempts to establish substantive connections between BAE and the auxiliary hypotheses risk committing one to a substantive and contentious account of what emotions are. This is problematic because SM does not provide sustained arguments in defense of such an account. Moreover, this move cuts against the initially ecumenical spirit of BAE, which is advertised as compatible with a wide range of leading theories of emotions.

Third, the lack of explicit explanatory relations between BAE and the auxiliary hypotheses invites the objection that doxasticism could be defended just as well by appealing directly to the auxiliary hypotheses themselves. On this view, categorizing belief as an emotion is unnecessary; at best, the appeal to emotions serves as a source of suggestive analogies.[6]

4. The general worry illustrated

In this section, I illustrate the general worry with concrete examples. I begin by focusing on resistance to counterevidence and then examine the prospects of using BAE to draw normative distinctions.

4.1. Resistance to counterevidence

Consider my ordinary belief in the proposition <Pedro is in his office>. If belief is an emotion, I have a representation of the proposition <Pedro is in his office>, and that representation feels accurate to me. However, this belief is not resistant to counterevidence. If Gustavo tells me that Pedro left his office to have lunch, I will immediately abandon my belief in light of that evidence.

Let us now compare this ordinary belief with some edge beliefs:

Delusion. Anna is a Capgras patient who believes <My husband is an impostor> (4, 41–2).

Religious belief 1. David believes <The God described in the Bible exists: there is such a person as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Jewish and Christian revelation> (4, 77).

Religious belief 2. Susan, who has been facing death from cancer, believes <When I die, some aspect of me will still exist> (33).

Fringe belief. Jorge believes <The Earth is flat> (118).

In at least some of these cases, subjects may be aware that they lack evidence for the relevant beliefs. Moreover, these beliefs are resistant to counterevidence. Yet, since BAE applies equally to my ordinary belief and these edge beliefs, it does not explain why the latter are resistant to evidence.[7] As a result, the explanatory project can get off the ground only if BAE is supplemented with auxiliary hypotheses.

One initial hypothesis is that 1) beliefs can differ from one another in their felt intensity, and 2) such differences are explanatorily relevant. If one doubts that ordinary beliefs feel a certain way, this may be because their felt character is barely noticeable (5). By contrast, in the case of edge beliefs, the feeling of accuracy is quite strong (53–8, 77, 128–9). Other things being equal, the more intense the feeling of accuracy, the more resistant the belief is to countervailing evidence.

Unfortunately, it remains unclear where these feelings of accuracy come from and what determines their strength. A natural hypothesis is that beliefs inherit their strength from the phenomenal intensity of their cognitive bases. To illustrate, Anna can believe that her husband has been replaced by an impostor because she perceives someone who looks like her husband without having the appropriate feeling of familiarity. The absence of this feeling of familiarity has been used to explain why Anna does not believe that the person who looks like her husband is, in fact, her husband (Dokic, 2025; Dub, 2015; Pacherie, 2008). This type of explanation is, however, unavailable to SM. After all, what appears to do the explanatory work is the phenomenal character of the cognitive base, rather than a *sui generis* feeling of accuracy distinctive of belief.

At some points, SM suggests that the feeling of accuracy distinctive of belief is better suited to persist over time than the feeling of accuracy proper to other emotions: "the belief persists even when those emotions subside. And the feeling of the belief (seemingly based on a memory), according to my account, will remain strong" (58).[8] This suggestion rests on a substantive empirical claim, namely, that the belief persists even when those emotions subside. As far as I can tell, SM does not provide evidence for this claim. Moreover, there is nothing in BAE that gives us reason to expect that the feeling characteristic of belief and other affective feelings have different persistence conditions. SM offers no argument for the claim that feelings of accuracy are better suited to persist over time than non-doxastic feelings. And even if those arguments were forthcoming, they would conflict with a large body of work that explains delusions, at least in part, as rational responses to anomalous, non-doxastic experiences (Dokic, 2025; Dub, 2015; Pacherie, 2008). To be sure, contradicting well-entrenched views is not in itself a defect. Nevertheless, a convincing defense of a new view requires engagement with established alternatives.[9]

These remarks illustrate different ways in which the explanatory gap between BAE and the auxiliary hypotheses leaves the latter vulnerable to challenge.

One of the most explicit attempts to connect BAE with auxiliary hypotheses arises when SM compares delusions to recalcitrant emotions. This suggestion is motivated by the plausible observation that delusions are not only resistant to counterevidence, but that deluded subjects often recognize that their own edge beliefs are not warranted. Similarly, consider fear of flying. Fabrice can be afraid of flying while acknowledging that the probability of dying in a plane crash is significantly lower than the probability of dying in a car accident (53). Still, some emotion theorists think that, in such cases, subjects face a "conflict without contradiction" (Grzankowski, 2020, p. 504).

Even if there is a structural analogy between delusions and recalcitrant emotions, it is hard to see that any genuine explanatory progress has been made. After all, recalcitrant emotions are standardly regarded as a *problem* for any theory of emotion. Accordingly, many philosophers take the ability to account for recalcitrant emotions to be a key desideratum in choosing among competing theories of emotion. It is therefore unsurprising that BAE, on its own, cannot elucidate the relevant "conflict without contradiction." Accounting for that conflict requires further substantive commitments about the nature of emotions. And it is precisely at this point that one risks endorsing a contentious and insufficiently supported account of emotions, thereby departing from the initially ecumenical spirit of SM's project.

Recalcitrant emotions have often been cited as an argument *against* judgment accounts of emotion, since such accounts predict that the conflict one finds in recalcitrant emotions should amount to a contradiction (Deonna & Teroni, 2012). Now, if belief is an emotion and delusions are recalcitrant emotions, then SM's solution offers little reassurance. It suggests that, in order to account for delusions, one must accept the same theoretical costs that defenders of judgment accounts of emotions have incurred in order to accommodate recalcitrant emotions.

SM herself appears sympathetic to Brady's (2009, p. 421) neo-judgmentalism about emotions. On this view, "[j]ust as feeling fear includes a strong inclination to accept the view that p is dangerous, believing includes a strong inclination to accept the view that p is accurate" (38). So, "[R]ecalcitrant emotions occur when one experiences priming but does not fully give into the inclinations" (55). This approach avoids straight contradiction. However, it is difficult to reconcile with the very concept of belief. SM rightly emphasizes that belief does not require subjective certainty (40, 70). Still, even if a belief falls short of subjective certainty, it does not follow that believing p merely consists in having a strong inclination to accept the view that p is accurate. Having an inclination to F is not the same as F-ing. Thus,

when one's degree of confidence in *p* reaches the threshold for belief – somewhere above 0.5 but below 1 – one should already count as accepting the view that *p* is accurate. Yet this move reintroduces the problematic contradiction that judgment theories of emotion have struggled to avoid. For this reason, many emotion theorists take the kind of tension at issue to be evidence that emotion is a non-doxastic experience (Deonna & Teroni, 2012), in a way that parallels classical objections to doxastic accounts of perceptual experience (Evans, 1982; McDowell, 1994).

SM rightly observes that many beliefs are "central" to our mental lives, in the sense that they are deeply intertwined with other mental states, projects, and habits.

> Consider someone who has grown up in a fundamentalist tradition and believes that the Bible is literally true. This person may come to conclude that this belief is unsupported, and that he should give it up. Now we can imagine that it would be very difficult to break the habit of believing something inculcated at a very early age and reinforced throughout one's life – just as it is very difficult to give up smoking after twenty years even when one decides one should. (37)

The same point may apply to "quite mundane beliefs," such as our belief in a physical world of objects. This is "such a central belief, around which so many other beliefs hinge, that change would require a lot of evidence" (132).

Here we have a further auxiliary hypothesis. Other things being equal, the more central a belief is to a subject's mental life, the more difficult it will be for her to abandon that belief in light of counterevidence (2015, p. 20). Notice, however, that the centrality hypothesis makes no reference to beliefs having a distinctive felt character. Indeed, it could account for the resistance to evidence of a zombie's edge beliefs. But the point does not depend on the possibility of zombies. If dispositional beliefs lack any particular feel and can nonetheless be central to a subject's mental life, then the centrality hypothesis can explain forms of resistance to evidence that BAE itself cannot. This may be a case in which a more promising defense of critical doxasticism would proceed by defending the auxiliary hypothesis on its own.

4.2. Drawing normative distinctions

All of the edge beliefs cited above are resistant to counterevidence. However, not all edge beliefs are normatively on a par. According to SM, religious beliefs with vague contents – like Religious belief 2 – are permissible. Once again, there is nothing in BAE *itself* that yields this result. Hence, SM is compelled to introduce auxiliary hypotheses to defend this normative distinction. In what follows, I discuss the tensions that arise when two auxiliary hypotheses are introduced.

First, SM introduces a meta-normative hypothesis. On her view, reasons and deontic statuses are ultimately grounded in practical values, which in turn derive from final values like survival, well-being, and flourishing (32, 73; 2015, 8, 22, 31, 38–41, 54–6, 129). Since not all edge beliefs contribute to these final values, not all edge beliefs are permissible. In earlier work, SM refers to this view as "normative pragmatism" (2015, p. 1).

Second, SM introduces a normative hypothesis. Drawing on James (1896), she maintains that beliefs not based on evidence can nevertheless be permissible when the evidence is absent, neutral, or inconclusive (77, 90–1, 100–1, 118; 2015, 5, 52–3, 55–6). This hypothesis enables SM to distinguish impermissible edge beliefs – such as delusions or religious beliefs with very specific contents – from permissible religious beliefs with vague contents. To be sure, some beliefs with very specific contents could contribute to a subject's well-being or flourishing. Still, there may be ample evidence speaking against them. When a subject displays such insensitivity to counterevidence, she risks undermining other practically valuable projects, such as the search for knowledge and truth (2015, 8, 50 fn 18, 52, 55).[10]

Unfortunately, both the meta-normative and normative hypotheses are logically independent of BAE. Moreover, nothing in BAE gives us reason to expect that these hypotheses are true. As a result, categorizing belief as an emotion begins to look like an idle cog in the project of drawing normative distinctions. It seems that these distinctions could be drawn by appealing directly to meta-normative principles that are *extrinsic* to the nature of mental states, together with substantive normative hypotheses that hold *independently* of whether belief is an emotion.

The problem can be illustrated with a simple observation. One could combine BAE with a fittingness-first approach and thereby reject both the meta-normative and the normative hypotheses. On the fittingness-first view, reasons and deontic statuses are grounded in the fittingness conditions of responses (Echeverri, 2019; McHugh & Way, 2022). Whether a reason is of the right kind depends on whether it bears on the fittingness of the response, and whether a response is permissible depends on whether it is grounded in the right kind of reasons. Now consider a morally contentious but influential example from D'Arms and Jacobson (2000). Suppose that the formal object of amusement is the comic. For the fittingness-first theorist, laughing at a joke is fitting just in case the joke is really funny. When that condition is met, one's amusement gets the joke right. If the sexist character of the joke is orthogonal to its comic character, then there is room for sexist jokes that are really funny. In that case, the sexist character of the joke is the wrong kind of consideration to assess the fittingness – and thus the permissibility – of the amusement.

Now suppose, as SM does, that the formal object of belief is accuracy. Suppose further that Susan's religious belief is based on reasons that do

not speak to the accuracy of that belief. Given a fittingness-first approach, it is difficult to see how her belief could be permissible while not being grounded in factors that bear on accuracy. This combination of views therefore predicts – *contra* SM – that Susan's religious belief is impermissible.

To be clear, I am not defending any specific normative verdicts about sexist jokes or about Susan's religious belief. My point is rather that construing belief as an emotion does not help advance the case for the permissibility of beliefs that are not based on evidence. This follows from the structural problems mentioned above: BAE is consistent with a fittingness-first approach to reasons and deontic statuses. If those fittingness conditions are determined solely by accuracy, there is no way to vindicate SM's intuition that some edge beliefs are permissible.

The meta-normative and normative hypotheses play a central role in SM's previous book (2015). It is therefore tempting to read the present book as an attempt to identify the kind of mental state belief must be for those hypotheses to be true. SM writes: "If beliefs are emotions, then they should be evaluated as such. To evaluate the appropriateness of belief, we have to think not only about whether the evidence supports the truth of the proposition believed, but also about whether the belief serves the more complex roles of navigation, coherence, and agential flourishing" (61). "If one accepts the narrow, 'standard' view of belief, then the only appropriate reasons are evidential or alethic. But if beliefs are emotions, the possibility opens up that there can be good non-evidential reasons to believe" (76; see also: 94, 117, 128, 140).

It is unclear to me how the integration is meant to proceed. Still, here is a possible reconstruction. SM seems to accept that fittingness conditions play a central role in an account of normativity (97). Perhaps the fittingness conditions of different mental states help explain why different mental states have different practical value for us. Her project may therefore require a more substantive conception of emotions, according to which they do not have truth or accuracy as their sole fittingness conditions. On this view, belief would have as many fittingness conditions as are required to contribute to survival, well-being, and flourishing (73, 78; 2015, 54).

According to SM, emotions enable us to make sense of ourselves and the world. They confer meaning and coherence. So, if beliefs are emotions, then they can be permissible in the absence of sufficient evidence, provided that they confer meaning and coherence without displaying undue resistance to counterevidence. Since some edge beliefs can provide coherence and meaning without such resistance, they are permissible. Susan's case is paradigmatic. "She believed [that some aspect of her would still exist] because it helped to mitigate the concern she had for the pain of her loved ones. The reasons for which she believed it were broadly practical, connected to love

and comfort rather than evidence and truth. Reasons of this kind and the beliefs they support help provide coherence and meaning" (87).

However, this hypothesis appears disconnected from BAE, according to which belief is a representation that one feels as accurate. Given SM's insistence that accuracy is an evaluative property, it is natural to think that her goal was to derive value-related reasons from accuracy understood as an evaluative property. Yet even granting that accuracy is an evaluative property, it seems ill-suited to ground the kinds of value-related reasons invoked here. If sense-making depends on the accuracy of the representation, then it is unclear how attitudes unsupported by evidence could contribute to sense-making. If, by contrast, sense-making is orthogonal to accuracy (2015, p. 8), then there is a disconnect between BAE and belief's capacity to help us make sense of ourselves and the world. Given this disconnect, one is left wondering why the sense-making function could not be fulfilled by states other than belief-understood-as-an-emotion.

In sum, the plurality of fittingness conditions that SM attributes to emotions is not reflected in her analysis of belief as an emotion. These fittingness conditions emerge only at the level of auxiliary hypotheses that operate in parallel with, and independently of, BAE. The result is several unsolved tensions between BAE and SM's normative and meta-normative views.

These unsolved tensions reemerge when we try to use BAE to ground negative normative assessments. Plausibly enough, delusions and fringe beliefs are irrational because they fail to respond sufficiently to evidence (56).[11] Given SM's insistence on recategorizing belief as an emotion, it is natural to expect that the irrationality of delusions and fringe beliefs is partly grounded in the fact that belief is an emotion. Alas, this assessment is only available if one assumes that delusions and fringe beliefs are *supposed* to be sensitive to evidence. Yet nothing in SM's account of belief supports this assumption. On the one hand, BAE consists solely of five features, none of which mentions belief's sensitivity to evidence. On the other hand, SM explicitly rejects standard doxasticist attempts to show that delusions are in fact sensitive to evidence, insisting instead that there is no minimal threshold of evidence responsiveness for belief (59). The result is an account of belief that lacks the resources to accommodate the assessment of delusions as irrational. If evidence sensitivity is not part of what it is for a state to be a belief, it is unclear why beliefs that are resistant to evidence should count as defective *qua* beliefs. And if belief need not meet any threshold of evidence responsiveness, it is likewise unclear why beliefs that respond little – or not at all – to counterevidence should be normatively defective.

At this point, SM might want to retreat to the meta-normative and normative considerations rehearsed above. Perhaps delusions' and fringe beliefs' failure to respond to evidence is a mark of irrationality because it

does not contribute to a subject's well-being or because it risks undermining other practically valuable projects, such as the search for knowledge and truth. Alas, these are substantive claims that would require further argument. Why couldn't those edge beliefs' failure to respond to evidence be in the service of the subject's well-being, despite being irrational in some respect? In any event, this line of response underscores the tension presented above. If meta-normative and normative considerations alone suffice to assess delusions and fringe beliefs as irrational, the detour through emotions seems to offer no explanatory gain. This is confirmed by SM's own text. When it comes to identifying a normative defect in delusions on behalf of BAE, SM ultimately appeals to inaccuracy:

> Emotions are subject to criticism, or perhaps to treatment, when they misrepresent. There is something wrong with the delusional subject's belief. If it is not a belief, but rather an acceptance or an imagining, it is not clear there is anything wrong with the state since both of these have a much looser connection with evidence and action than do our emotions. (59)

Unfortunately, inaccuracy is not the relevant dimension of assessment here. Accurate beliefs can be irrationally held, and inaccurate beliefs can be rationally held. What makes delusions and fringe beliefs defective is not merely their inaccuracy, but also their resistance to counterevidence.[12]

5. A way forward

SM is probably right in thinking that the relationship between emotions and evidence is complicated. However, categorizing belief as an emotion does not seem to yield a better understanding of why the relationship between belief and evidence is complicated as well. Whatever progress SM makes on this front should be credited to a range of auxiliary hypotheses that are not clearly grounded in BAE. Moreover, several of these auxiliary hypotheses are themselves problematic.

To my mind, a more promising way of rejecting Premise 2 of the Master Argument is to develop an account of belief that jointly satisfies two constraints:

CONSTITUTIVITY. Evidence sensitivity is constitutive of belief.

FLEXIBILITY. Evidence sensitivity is consistent with (apparent) lack of evidence responsiveness.

CONSTITUTIVITY rephrases condition 1 of the Standard View (Section 1). FLEXIBILITY enables us to make room for *bona fide* beliefs that do not respond to evidence.[13] This framework could be put in the service of a broadly pragmatist view of the normativity of belief.

How can evidence sensitivity be constitutive of belief while including beliefs that do not (seem to) respond to evidence? Evidence sensitivity is

a dispositional property that may either fail to manifest or manifest in unexpected ways. In my view, evidence sensitivity is to evidence responsiveness what fragility is to shattering. In the same way in which a fragile vase may never shatter, some evidence-sensitive beliefs may not respond to evidence. Unlike fragility, however, evidence sensitivity can have unexpected manifestations. From this perspective, defenders of Premise 2 wrongly infer the absence of a disposition from a (seeming) absence of its manifestation. Insofar as a disposition can be present in the absence of an (expected) manifestation, edge beliefs can be sensitive to evidence even though they do not manifest it (in expected ways).[14]

Perhaps the main obstacle to taking this approach seriously is that we tend to think of evidence-responsiveness as reflex-like (Williams, 1973, p. 137). However, evidence-responsiveness is a more complex affair. First, different individuals may *weigh* the same piece of evidence *differently* or have different views of what counts as a *legitimate* piece of evidence. Second, the process leading from the possession of evidence, through its weighing, to a change in one's belief may be subject to *interferences*. Third, even if a belief is responding to evidence, the effects of that responsiveness may take some time to become effective. If you press the brakes while driving a car at 100 km/h, the car will only stop after some time.

If beliefs are constitutively embedded in a rich network of other mental states, abilities, and habits, then many instances of FLEXIBILITY are to be expected. Since I cannot fully defend this view here, I will content myself with a few suggestive examples.

A subject's background beliefs can influence what she counts as a legitimate piece of evidence. While some of us think that only sensory perception could provide evidence about matters of fact, theists often cite *revelation* and *quasi-perceptual evidence* from peculiar spiritual experiences (63) to back up their theistic beliefs. If one's background belief is that revelation and extra-sensory forms of experience are legitimate sources of evidence for one's religious beliefs, then religious beliefs will manifest an unexpected form of evidence responsiveness.[15]

In other cases, interference from other mental states could "block" the manifestation of a belief's evidence sensitivity.[16] Fringe beliefs' sensitivity to evidence might be blocked by emotions such as fear, anger, resentment, and shame.[17] Yet, the success of projects to alter those beliefs might depend on our ability to remove those "emotional blockers," so that the fringe beliefs can respond to counterevidence. One can only hope to rationally change someone's fringe belief if one takes it to be sensitive to evidence.

Beliefs that are deeply intertwined with many aspects of one's mental life may also exhibit delayed evidence responsiveness. In general, revising a belief is not like erasing a written sentence. If the belief is entailed or explained by many other beliefs one already has, one cannot effectively

revise it without revising the entailing or explanatory beliefs (Harman, 1986). If the belief is presupposed in well-entrenched habits, one cannot revise the belief without changing one's behavior. This might be what happens when some pieces of evidence contradict one's deep-seated political convictions.

What about normative distinctions? If one is willing to invoke evolutionary considerations, one might view the fittingness conditions of our most primitive beliefs as specifying the conditions under which they contribute to the fulfillment of certain evolutionary functions under normal conditions. Beliefs that serve basic needs – such as finding shelter, food, or sexual partners – may plausibly have truth or accuracy as their fittingness conditions. As believers become more complex and embedded in increasingly complex social environments, however, they may come under additional pressures to fulfill functions that are not well served by truth or accuracy alone, such as signaling group allegiance or finding meaning in the face of imminent death. These new pressures could, in turn, give rise to new fittingness conditions that sometimes come into tension with truth or accuracy (as when a fringe belief is adaptive but epistemically irrational), while at other times peacefully coexist with them (as when a vague religious belief helps Susan mitigate the concern she had for the pain of her loved ones).

These remarks are, of course, highly schematic and in need of further development. Still, I hope they gesture toward more direct ways of embracing critical doxasticism. While SM sees the complex relationship between belief and evidence as a *consequence* of belief being an emotion, we should instead begin by showing how it is a *consequence* of a proper understanding of belief's evidence sensitivity. This, in turn, might allow us to draw on and bring together some of the many valuable insights developed throughout SM's rich and wide-ranging discussion.

Notes

1. The phrase "edge beliefs" comes from Schleifer McCormick (Schleifer McCormick, 2025: *x*, 1). Hereafter, references to this book are given by page number only. References to Schleifer McCormick (2015) are given by date and page number.
2. SM's critical doxasticism is not limited to blocking Premise 2 of the Master Argument. She also deploys it to address a wide range of normative issues that arise for specific edge beliefs. While I will briefly discuss some of these issues, I will focus for the most part on the connection between belief and evidence.
3. In certain contexts, being very accurate can have negative value. Consider someone who is very accurate at identifying small flaws in their close friends. This high degree of accuracy can undermine their friendships.

4. Obvious alternatives are that belief has cognitive phenomenology, or that it is accompanied by perceptual or affective phenomenology.
5. By parity of reasoning, if beliefs have a strong connection with motivation and action, it is unclear why, given BAE, there are *bona fide* beliefs that are misaligned with the subject's actions.
6. Many of the auxiliary hypotheses I discuss below can be found in SM's earlier work. She contends that it is both *possible* and, in some cases, *permissible* to believe for non-alethic reasons. Although her earlier book gestures toward BAE (2015, pp. 6, 66, 68, 83), the arguments developed there are independent of it.
7. SM herself cites examples of emotions that respond smoothly to counterevidence (51).
8. SM develops a similar line of thought in relation to fringe beliefs (117).
9. SM has two main objections to the view of feelings as evidence. First, following Brady (2009), SM argues that, since feelings are not sufficient reasons for belief, their epistemic role is to motivate one to search for reasons that justify those feelings (55). This argument raises two main problems. On the one hand, Brady's account is intended to characterize the epistemic role of *all* the emotions. If belief is an emotion, then Brady's account should apply to belief as well. However, BAE makes this difficult to explain. If believing that p entails feeling that p is accurate, it is unclear why the believer should be motivated to search for reasons that bear on whether p. This point holds even if belief does not require a confidence level of 1. On the other hand, the concept of evidence does not require that only items that provide sufficient reasons for a response count as evidence; clues, indications, and signs can also serve as evidence. Indeed, many putative cases of pragmatic reasons are such that, on their own, they do not provide sufficient reasons for belief. They strengthen already available arguments or pieces of evidence (86–7). SM herself makes room for this view in the context of discussing her ability to feel that someone is narcissistic (77–8).

   Second, SM worries that construing feelings as evidence can have morally and politically problematic consequences. For example, disgust led to beliefs in the immorality of homosexuality (55). If one rejects infallibilism about evidence, there will always be cases in which one's evidence misleads, whether that evidence comes from a feeling or another epistemic source. Such cases can have morally and politically harmful consequences. Consider the damage gossip can cause. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to disqualify testimony as a source of evidence merely because some forms of testimony can have morally and politically problematic effects. If the criterion for qualifying as evidence were that it could never have such consequences, nothing would ever count as evidence.
10. SM also suggests that edge beliefs are permissible only if they do not corrupt one's reflective capacities (77).
11. SM presents her view of belief as emotion as "a model for assessing the rationality of beliefs" (9).
12. Echeverri (2019) emphasizes the distinction between correctness and permissibility assessments. An analogy might help here. I know that the lines of the Müller-Lyer diagram are the same length. However, the line with outward-pointing dashes still looks longer than the line with inward-pointing dashes. My experience is defective because it is inaccurate; yet it is not irrational, since it is not supposed to respond to counterevidence.
13. SM should be sympathetic to FLEXIBILITY. In her critique of Egan (2009), she says that beliefs could have "a less rigid and defined role or function" (46–7).

14. SM seems to use "sensitivity to evidence" (63, 117) as coextensive with "responsiveness to evidence" (59).
15. Psychologically, the religious belief will manifest evidence sensitivity. This is consistent with denying that the religious belief responds to something that is, from an epistemological perspective, admissible as evidence.
16. The concept of a blocker comes from the literature on dispositions (Lewis, 1997; Mumford, 1998).
17. SM should agree. On her view, lack of responsiveness to counterevidence may be due to fringe believers "seeing it as a threat to their own social identity" (129). Her description of how online conversations with fringe believers unfold seems to point to the existence of many other "emotional blockers."

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