Freedom and Beliefs

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How to Change People's Beliefs?
Doxastic Coercion vs. Evidential Persuasion

Abstract: The very existence of society depends on the ability of its members to influence formatively the beliefs, desires, and actions of their fellows. In every sphere of social life, powerful human agents (whether individuals or institutions) tend to use coercion as a favorite shortcut to achieving their aims without taking into consideration the non-violent alternatives or the negative (unintended) consequences of their actions. This propensity for coercion is manifested in the doxastic sphere by attempts to shape people's beliefs (and doubts) while ignoring the essential characteristics of these doxastic states. I argue that evidential persuasion is a better route to influence people's beliefs than doxastic coercion. Doxastic coercion perverts the belief-forming mechanism and undermines the epistemic and moral faculties both of coercers and coercees. It succeeds sporadically and on short-term. Moreover, its pseudo doxastic effects tend to disappear once the use of force ceases. In contrast to doxastic coercion, evidential persuasion produces lasting correct beliefs in accordance with proper standards of evidence. It helps people to reach the highest possible standards of rationality and morality. Evidential persuasion is based on the principles of symmetry and reciprocity in that it asks all persuaders to use for changing the beliefs of others only those means they used in forming their own beliefs respecting the freedom of will and assuming the standard of rationality. The arguments in favor of evidential persuasion have a firm theoretical basis that includes a conceptual clarification of the essential traits of beliefs. Belief is treated as a hypercomplex system governed by Leibniz's law of continuity and the principle of self-organization. It appears to be a mixture consisting of a personal propositional attitude and physical objects and processes. The conceptual framework also includes a typology of believers according to the standards of evidence they assume. In this context, I present a weak version of Clifford' ethical

imperative. In the section dedicated to the prerequisites for changing beliefs, I show how doxastic agents can infuse premeditated or planned changes in the flow of endogenous changes in order to shape certain beliefs in certain desired forms. The possibility of changing some beliefs in a planned manner is correlated with a feedback doxastic (macro-mechanism) that produces a reaction when it is triggered by a stimulus. In relation with the two routes to influence beliefs, a response mechanism is worth taking into consideration – a mechanism governed to a significant extent by human conscience and human will, that appears to be complex, acquired, relatively detached from visceral or autonomic information processing, and highly variable in reactions. Knowing increasingly better this doxastic mechanism, we increase our chances to use evidential persuasion as an effective (although not time-efficient) method to mold people's beliefs.

In general, people feel at ease with their beliefs, cherish them, boast of them, and long to see them universally shared or accepted. Anyone would like to live in a society where his own beliefs were common beliefs, but (un)fortunately, this is impossible. As every human being evolves under the influence of a unique combination of genetic, educational, and environmental factors, all human societies manifest a wide diversity of opinions and beliefs, especially in matters of politics and religion. These differences between people's political and religious beliefs do not matter a great deal at individual level, but they tend to stir up big trouble at institutional and societal level.

Caught in the tangled web of everyday life, a person does not bother too much about what other people believe or think in terms of religion and politics. Ordinarily, she interacts with her fellows in the light of daily problems, needs, and interests disregarding the affinity or the dissimilarity between their beliefs. Even in situations where the (dis)similarity of beliefs is a major factor in building social relationships, people tend to adopt a fairly tolerant attitude towards non- or mis-believers. They could shun them, despise them or quarrel with them from time to time, but as a rule, they do not try – as individuals – to proselytize, indoctrinate, or punish them.

People come under strong pressure to hold or give up certain beliefs (in particular, religious or political beliefs) not from singular individuals but from myriads of social institutions such as governments, political parties, religious organizations, non-governmental organizations, schools, families, fraternities, clubs. It is true that these institutions sometimes begin to exert pressure on nonbelievers and misbelievers in the form of persuasion, but if persuasion fails, they resort to coercion. Throughout history a huge number of people have been bullied, ostracized, imprisoned, tortured and killed because of their beliefs or doubts on matters of politics or religion, and, sadly, the institutions' propensity for using such violent means is still conspicuous all over the world (including the Euro-Atlantic area, that is widely recognized as a space of security, stability, democracy, and freedom).

The exertion of force with the aim of getting people to believe or not to believe something– in other words *doxastic coercion* − is all the more odious, given that it is by nature counterproductive and there is a highly effective method for influencing people's beliefs, namely *evidential persuasion*. In what follows, I will argue on a firm theoretical basis that evidential persuasion is a better route to influence people's beliefs because it is in accordance with the essential characteristic of the doxastic states.

1.   Beliefs and doubts: a conceptual clarification

In every sphere of social life, powerful human agents − whether individuals or institutions − tend to use coercion as a favorite *shortcut* to achieving their aims without taking into consideration the non-violent alternatives or the negative (unintended) consequences of their actions. The use of force in the field of doxastic states proves the propensity for violence of powerful agents but also their lack of knowledge about the essential traits of beliefs and doubts.

In general, one knows sufficiently a certain object only if he has so clear ideas about it that he can recognize the object and is able to differentiate it from other objects, especially from those objects that are very similar with it (cf. Leibniz 1896, 266). In particular, one has enough knowledge about doxastic states only if he can clearly identify them among all other similar states, on the basis of their fundamental features. In order to reach an acceptable level of knowledge about the nature of beliefs and doubts, I will define them by highlighting progressively the essential similarities and differences in relation with other phenomena.

Although it is a *locus communis* to presume that beliefs are attitudes or mental states (Okabe 1910, 565; Adamatzky 2001, 199; Swinburne 2001, 38; Vahid 2006, 305; Majors 2008, 281; Albahari 2014, 705; Audi 2001, 98; Buchak 2014, 287; Marquez 2014, 30; Fârte 2015, 153), it seems more plausible that beliefs are *mixtures of mental and physical factors*. Physical elements are inseparable parts of beliefs in the same way as symptoms are components of (mental) illnesses. The presence both of beliefs and diseases can be inferred solely on the basis of their physical ingredients or manifestations. For example, my belief that desperate people are immune to reasoned arguments has a mental, intangible constituent, in the same sense in which my fantasy about living in Paris, my desire for personal autonomy, or my intention to write a book on formal logic have a psychological, immaterial one, but it has also a physical component consisting of neural networks, physiological processes, biochemical signals circulating in my blood stream, electrochemical signals sent through my nerve pathways, linguistic expressions, nonverbal behaviors, etc. Without material factors any discussion about beliefs would be pure speculations, inasmuch as "[s]cience can prove the existence only of what is physical." (Charlton 2006, 70).

The mental and physical ingredients of belief continuously influence each other (in a dynamic environment) and make up an intricate system governed by the Leibniz's law of continuity and the principle of self-organization. As hypercomplex systems, beliefs constantly undergo *insensible updates* both at mental and physical level, and they change dramatically and unpredictably when the sum of these infinitesimal variations reaches a critical threshold. As partially autonomous systems, beliefs cannot be changed directly and at will. For example, even if I wanted to do it, I could not relinquish now the belief that desperate people are immune to reasoned arguments because countless cognitive, affective, and conative experiences have closely linked in my person a vivid mental state with a multitude of physical factors. My new mental and physical experiences – entertaining the prospect of giving up the belief, writing the sentences "I should give up the belief that desperate people are immune to reasoned arguments", "Desperate people are receptive to reasoned arguments", and "John is a desperate debtor, but he is responsive to my sound economic arguments", imagining my future conduct in the absence of this belief – bring only marginal changes in the complex system of the mentioned belief.

The intricate nature of beliefs defies all forms of *reductionism*.[1] Thus, logical or definitional reductionism were acceptable in the doxastic sphere only if we would be able to translate without residue all words and sentences referring to doxastic states into language about physical entities or processes. In fact, in any human society, people interact consciously with their fellows solely in relation to certain mental representations or phenomena: desires, intentions, hopes, fantasies, actions, goals, means, guesses, beliefs, doubts. No one can put into correspondence, for example, my mental representation that slavery is economically inefficient with an aggregate of physiological processes, neural networks, bio- or electro-chemical signals. If causal reductionism were valid, it would be possible to demonstrate that physical ingredients of beliefs (ultimately, the parts studied by subatomic physics) are determinatives of doxastic states and processes. Actually, the methods and laws of factual sciences (e.g. physics, biology, chemistry) don't provide us with a reliable tool to infer the presence of specific mental states by virtue of certain physical events, especially brain data. Such inference would be possible only if the activity from brain regions were truly selective for specific states of mind. Actually, "[a]s the brain is an evolved organ, with higher order states emerging from lower order mechanisms, very few of its regions are so selective as to fully justify inferences of this kind." (Harris et al. 2009, 5). On the other hand, we cannot ignore the physical substratum of beliefs and their physical expressions or *markers*. No mental state can subsist in the absence of a physical correlate, and any analysis of beliefs starts taking into consideration their physical (especially, their linguistic) expressions. Inasmuch as there are no definite markers of beliefs, we can infer from particular (physical) expressions the existence of a specific mental correlate and, consequently, the presence of a certain belief only in a *tentative* manner, in other words, through trial and error.

The existence of a specific belief depends on a relative mental *stability* and a corresponding stable process of reaction to environmental stimuli (Marshall 1899, 362). A vacillating mind correlates strongly with disordered physical responses to environmental changes and with the absence of well-formed beliefs. If too frequent, the updates of mental states and their physical correlates could also undermine the persistence of beliefs even if the persons in question enjoy great stability both of

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[1] In her article *Reductionism: How Did We Fall Into It and Can We Emerge From It?*, Nancey Murphy presents in a systematic manner the most relevant forms of reductionism. Debates between reductionists and emergentists are highly relevant in the field of doxastic states and processes.

mind and underlying physiological processes. In the absence of a backup system, repeated updates erode the pillars of beliefs so that the holder of them comes to fall into *psittacism*, repeating automatically – like a parrot – some (linguistic) expressions of beliefs without having the corresponding mental states. For example, many lapsed Christians have lost their faith in God, but they still occasionally recite the Nicene Creed, although their religious beliefs have vanished and the sentences they uttered don't make any sense for them.

Beliefs belong to a vast class of being states whose mental constituents are *propositional attitudes*. Any propositional attitude is "a mental state that links a person to a particular proposition" (Marquez 2014, 30), more exactly, to an abstract, sharable object that is a *bearer of truth and falsity* because it refers to a state of affairs in the world (cf. Marquez, 28). Propositional attitudes can be classified according to the *direction of fit* between mind and world, in other words, between propositions and the corresponding states of affairs. Some propositional attitudes have *mind-to-world* direction of fit because people who adopt them want their propositions to match the states of affairs. These states of mind are called *thetic* or *theoretical* attitudes (cf. Majors 2008, 282; Vahid 2006, 303; Audi 2014, 98) and appear in the structure of the being states like assertions, beliefs, doubts, guesses, conjectures, hunches, etc. For example, if I say "I believe that powerful political institutions tend to employ violence as their most reliable tool," I affirm implicitly that I wanted to be a truth-teller and strove to make my proposition well-adjusted to reality. Other propositional attitudes have *world-to-mind* direction of fit and are called *telic* or *practical* attitudes. (cf. Majors 2008, 282; Vahid 2006, 303; Audi 2014, 98). People who take these stances want the states of affairs to match their propositions. Such propositional attitudes are present in wishing, desiring, wanting, hoping, etc. For example, if I say "I wish that I could afford a new car," I imply that the world has to change for making true the proposition "I can afford a new car." Finally, there are also *neutral* propositional attitudes – like imagining, fantasizing, visualizing, daydreaming, etc. – that don't correlate with a particular direction of fit. For example, if I imagine life without Internet, I don't prospect any adjustment to my mind or the world.

In theory, it is relatively easy to distinguish between thetic, telic, and neutral attitudes, but in practice, people (un)consciously and (in)voluntarily amalgamate them. For example, politicians and financiers who let us understand that they believe that expansionary monetary policy stimulates economic activity – although they know very well that there is

plenty of counterevidence – either are not sincere or are victims of wishful thinking. In any case, these people express a mingled being state, probably a mixture of belief, hope, and desire, and, as such, their propositional attitude is part theoretical, part practical.

Believing (rationally) something means mainly giving *cognitive assent* to a proposition that is in essence *unfalsifiable* or just *partially falsifiable*. We can rationally give or not our cognitive assent to propositions like "Force always attracts men of low morality" (Albert Einstein), "There are certain totalitarian and monolithic tendencies inherent in democracy" (Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn) or "Jesus Christ was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and was buried, and the third day He rose again, and ascended into heaven" (The Nicene Creed) because we can provide evidence in favor of or against them, but we cannot definitely prove that these propositions are true or false. On the other hand, if we give our cognitive assent to a proposition that is falsifiable but confirmed as true – e.g. "The sum of the three angles of a triangle is 180 degrees" –, we are in a state of *knowledge*, and not in a state of belief. In addition, if we were not able to assent to a proposition confirmed as true – e.g. "Money spent on consumer goods cannot be invested in capital goods" –, we would be in a state of *delusion*. In the sphere of politics and religion, *all* people acquire (that's true, in particular proportions) beliefs, knowledge, and delusions.

A state of believing implies not just a cognitive assent to a proposition, but an *affective attitude* as well. "To believe" means literally and originally "to hold dear" (cf. Marquez 2014, 38). The believer attaches importance to his assent, considering the object of his attitude worthy of love. The affective dimension allows us to differentiate more clearly beliefs from knowledge. As I mentioned above, knowledge has as object a proposition that is both falsifiable and confirmed as true, while the propositional content of belief is unfalsifiable or partially falsifiable. Added to that, knowledge is discussed and tested *sine ira et studio*, while beliefs tend to provoke heated discussions and fierce controversies. In the face of overwhelming evidence, people easily give up their pretended or obsolete knowledge. On the other hand, people tend to preserve zealously their beloved beliefs, especially their political and religious beliefs, even if those beliefs are based on scant evidence and there is plenty of counterevidence.

Beliefs are *personal experiences*, but knowledge about them is part subjective, part objective. Any belief contains objects that exist external to and independent of subjects, namely its propositional content –

as an abstract, sharable, and believer's mind-independent entity[2] – and its (linguistic) expressions established and sanctioned as such by society. The other components of belief – the cognitive and affective attitude toward propositional content, the idiosyncratic manifestations of belief, and the biological processes that physically support belief – are internal experiences of the believer. Due to the internal constituents of belief, people have a rightful claim on their beliefs and may repel the intrusions of social institutions upon them.

Although beliefs are predominantly personal, knowledge about them is mostly *objective*. The assertion of D.H. Mellor that believers have a *privileged* (albeit not infallible) *access* to their beliefs (Mellor 1997-1998, 87) seems plausible, but it is also highly questionable. People have for sure a privileged access, for example, to their dreams because they are private mental events and, consequently, purely subjective phenomena. Knowledge about a person's dreams is impossible, unless the dreamer reveals them. The subjective knowledge of dreamer is a *sine qua non* for any other knowledge about his dreams. In contrast with dreams, beliefs can be known even if the believer does not reveal his subjective knowledge about his private mental states. On the basis of physical, observable markers of beliefs, we can infer in a tentative manner (through trial and error) many characteristics of those beliefs, gaining objective knowledge about them.

Belief is partially analogous to action, but it is ultimately a state, more exactly, an *involuntary continuing state* (cf. Swinburne 2001, 38). It is true that both belief and action are "commonly grounded in reasons" and "sensitive to changes in one's environment". Moreover, they can be described as "objects of decision and deliberation" and are a "basis for praising or blaming the subject." (Audi 2001, 93) However, believing is not acting, although expressing a belief deliberately (in a certain manner) is. We produce, for instance, a song singing, but we cannot analogously produce a belief believing. Furthermore, a belief can constitute the object of our actions – searching evidence for its propositional content,

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[2] In fact, no one can call to mind exactly the same idea because all ideas (like any other object in the world) undergo continuously infinitesimal transformations. If a person cannot preserve exactly the same idea, much less two people could have – in fact – the same idea. However, by abstraction, we can eliminate those particularities of propositions that seem irrelevant in a given context so that we could say that two or more persons take into consideration identical propositions or, in other words, the same proposition as a sharable object. It is possible to say, for example, that two or more persons debate whether taxation is theft, inasmuch as we presume that they take into consideration the same proposition, namely the proposition "Taxation is theft".

expressing it linguistically before our friends, correlating it with other beliefs, etc. – only if it impinges on our consciousness. It should be added here that every human being possesses at any one time a *tangled web of beliefs*, but he is aware sporadically only of few of them. (Fârte 2015, 157). Finally, we deserve praise or blame for holding a certain belief only insofar it is proven that our (deliberate) actions have led to that state. Someone could innocently hold a morally reprehensible belief (e.g. the belief that all Romanians are thieves and liars) if we cannot prove that he came to that belief by culpable (in)actions. However, he is to blame if he expresses deliberately in public his belief thus breaking the law.

2. From doxastic states to doxastic conduct

Belief, together with *doubt*, constitutes a *dual doxastic system* that shapes people's desires and guides their actions. As Peirce said, belief is "a calm and satisfactory state" to which we cling tenaciously, "not merely to believing, but to believing just what we do believe" (Peirce 1877; cf. Cunningham 2005, 179). By contrast, doubt is "an easy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass [again] into the state of belief" (Peirce 1877; cf. Cunningham 2005, 179). Neither belief nor doubt is fabricated at will, but arises from lived experience that confronts doxastic states with the world of evidence and counterevidence. In general, people are predisposed to preserving their beliefs and tend to get rid of their doubts, and they can to a certain extent influence them.

Although animated by the same disposition to maintain their beliefs and shatter their doubts, people differ significantly with respect to their *doxastic conduct*. Some persons are naturally *credulous*, sanguine, or hopeful and strive for the *peace of mind*. As a rule, they are satisfied with their beliefs and do not need to see that propositions to which they gave their cognitive assent are confirmed as true. Holding beliefs that are scarcely challenged by doubts, these people are slightly concerned about how things stand in reality and tend to act in a hasty and careless manner. Other persons are naturally *skeptical*, inquisitive, or pessimistic and are energized by the *love of truth*. By and large, these people hold unsettled beliefs that change continuously under pressure to match reality as closely as possible. They are constantly racked by doubts because the closer to reality, the more doubts arise about the correctness of beliefs. Assailed by doubts, these persons are inclined to hesitate and procrastinate before acting, but once decided to act, they conduct themselves in a conscientious, cautious, and methodical manner. Last but not least, we

also have to take into consideration the category of *rational believers*, who reach and keep a proper balance between the peace of mind and the love of truth. Whatever natural predispositions they have, rational believers endeavor to know as well as possible the belief-producing processes or mechanisms in order to exert a formative influence over their doxastic states. For example, if naturally predisposed to be gullible, a rational believer voluntarily exposes himself to evidence that contradict some of his beliefs despite the cognitive dissonance with which he has to deal. On the contrary, if inclined to pessimism and skepticism, a rational believer doesn't resign himself to be haunted by unreasonable doubts, but he will adopt "reflection-stoppers" in order to break the pernicious flux of thoughts.

Many particularities of doxastic conduct manifested by human beings depend on the standards of evidence they use both voluntarily and involuntarily. On the one hand, credulous people have low standards of evidence so that they hold to a large extent *overbeliefs*, namely beliefs that – from a rational point of view – are based on insufficient evidence.[3] Such persons may irrationally believe, for example, that a rabbit's foot brings good luck or that breaking a mirror brings seven years bad luck probably because these overbeliefs satisfy some emotional or practical needs. Despite their possible instrumental value, the above-mentioned beliefs (together with their holders) deserve harsh criticism, especially if credulous believers try to justify their overbelief on the basis of anecdotal evidence or ancient foolish sayings. On the other hand, skeptical people use too high standards of evidence so that they fail to adopt a certain belief even though – from a rational point of view – they have good evidence for it. Because of their compulsive doubts, skeptical people are prone to form *underbeliefs* or *devalued beliefs*, in other words, beliefs characterized by an unjustified diminution both in propositional content and cognitive or affective assent. For example, it is possible that an incredulous person doesn't believe his car is in good enough condition to drive it on a trip although an experienced auto mechanic checked it and told her that everything is okay. Because of her unreasoned doubt and, probably, emotional troubles, this person is not able to hold a more reasonable belief and to enjoy a pleasant trip. The holders of underbeliefs deserve the same blame as credulous persons, especially if they consciously maintain their inappropriate doxastic conduct. Finally, rational people strive to meet – through trial and error – a proper standard of evidence and keep it appropriate by means of repeated updates. Even if

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[3] The problem of overbeliefs (and doxastic responsibility) is discussed thoroughly by Brian Zamulinski in the article *Christianity and the Ethics of Belief* (Zamulinski 2008).

they do not always live up to the proper standard of evidence, they increase their chances of forming *reasonable beliefs*. Such a standard of evidence has – as a constitutive rule – a *weak version* of Clifford's ethical imperative and can be reached only by (moral) rational believers.

Clifford's maxim – "[it is] wrong to believe on insufficient evidence, or to nourish belief by suppressing doubts and avoiding investigation" (Clifford 1879, 182-183) – does not stipulate that people have to (1) form their beliefs in a fully controllable manner, (2) erase immediately from their mind all irrational beliefs, or (3) doubt some of their beliefs in a voluntaristic manner (cf. Fârte 2015, 174). However, it implies that it is wrong in all cases not to take into consideration all *spontaneous doubts*[4] and all the *available evidence* that support them. (In parenthesis, I should add that Clifford's imperative is not a deontic principle, but a constitutive rule even though some expressions used by William Clifford – "he had no right to believe on such evidence", "[he] cannot escape the duty of investigating", "No simplicity of mind (…) can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe", etc. (Clifford 1879, 178; 179; 183) – suggest this. Any duty presupposes the general capability to fulfill it. But it is an undeniable fact that many people are not able to fulfill "the duty of investigating", especially credulous believers. We cannot say they are guilty of failing to perform that duty, but they don't count as rational believers because they don't reach the standard of investigating the available evidence.)

This weak version of Clifford's imperative allows us to evaluate the doxastic conduct of human beings and correlate the above-mentioned types of believers with particular standards of evidence. In order to illustrate the point, I will do an analysis of the famous example presented by William Clifford in his opus *The Ethics of Belief*:

> "A shipowner was about to send to sea an emigrant-ship. He knew that she was old, and not overwell built at the first; that she had seen many seas and climes, and often had needed repairs. Doubts had been suggested to him that possibly she was not seaworthy. These doubts preyed upon his mind, and made him unhappy; he thought that perhaps he ought to have her thoroughly overhauled and refitted, even though this should put him to great expense. Before the ship sailed, however, he succeeded in overcoming these melancholy reflections. He said to

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[4]   Strictly speaking, all doubts are spontaneous doubts, inasmuch as they appear without effort or premeditation, resulting from a natural impulse. No one can doubt at will, and no one can be forced to doubt.

himself that she had gone safely through so many voyages and weathered so many storms that it was idle to suppose she would not come safely home from this trip also. He would put his trust in Providence, which could hardly fail to protect all these unhappy families that were leaving their fatherland to seek for better times elsewhere. He would dismiss from his mind all ungenerous suspicions about the honesty of builders and contractors. In such ways he acquired a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy; he watched her departure with a light heart, and benevolent wishes for the success of the exiles in their strange new home that was to be; and he got his insurance-money when she went down in mid-ocean and told no tales." (Clifford, 1879, 177-178)

The scenario imagined by Clifford is a bit distorted because it is based on the false presumption that "it is not possible (…) to sever the belief from the action it suggests" (Clifford 1879, 181). Actually, no belief suggests a specific action, in other words, it is not possible to establish one-to-one correlations between beliefs and actions. Moreover, beliefs only guide our actions; they don't push us to perform them. Anyway, the shipowner in Clifford's story seems to be a rational believer, more exactly, a *wicked* rational believer. He is not a naive, credulous man. He knew that his ship has serious problems, and the risk of sinking loomed large in his mind. His doubts are reasoned. Because of greater risk of sinking, he probably renewed the insurance policy to improve the insurance coverage of his ship. All other considerations of the shipowner are *misleading rationale* that he fabricated not for stifling his doubt (impossible task!), but for justifying his risky decision. If the shipowner had felt no doubt despite the signs of wear, he could be seen as an incautious credulous person; if doubts had brought the shipowner into a state of prostration, it would have been a case of skeptical irresolute person. In these last two situations, the shipowner would deserve to be blamed to a much lesser extent.

It is noteworthy that all three types of believers – credulous believer, skeptical believer, and rational believer – are present to a lesser or greater extent in every doxastic agent. Nobody is entirely and in all circumstances either credulous, skeptical or rational. For example, an academic could behave as a rational believer in the field of science, as a credulous believer in his family and religious life, and as a skeptical, undecided person in political domain.

3.   Prerequisites for molding doxastic states

As mentioned earlier, all beliefs and doubts undergo continuously "unauthored" changes, in accordance with Leibniz's law of continuity and the principle of self-organization. Individuals and social institutions sporadically intervene in this flow of endogenous changes adding premeditated changes in order to shape certain doxastic states in certain desired forms. The endeavors to bring about the expected changes may have a fair chance of success provided that their authors (1) can identify the object of the prospective change, whether it is about a belief or doubt; (2) can prefigure the intended result of change; (3) know sufficiently some belief-producing/ changing mechanisms; and (4) are able and motivated to influence the initial doxastic state in accordance with certain belief-producing/ changing mechanisms.

The first condition is very difficult to satisfy although at first glance it seems quite trivial. Unlike other performers, the agents of doxastic changes locate the object of their transformative action by means of *fallible inferences*, and not through direct observation. For example, a person who want to sculpt a marble statue knows very well how to find a suitable marble block. Certainly, she will not carve by mistake a piece of wood or a stone instead of a marble block because she can easily make the difference between these objects through a simple observation. On the contrary, an individual who tries to mold other people's beliefs often misses the declared object of his action. He works on other things or, more unfortunately, on nothingness. The explanation of this situation is quite simple. As mentioned above, any belief has a mental constituent and a material one. The mental component of belief is a propositional attitude that coincides with the cognitive-affective assent of believer to a propositional content that he considers true (even if there is no definitive confirmation). The material component of it consists of objects that could be ascertained by the senses either directly, or with the help of certain tools that extend and refine our basic senses. The speech acts together with the sentences produced by performing them, the actions that seem to spring from particular dispositions or tendencies, certain overt bodily reactions, certain automated expressive reactions, and some neuro-physiological processes figure prominently among these objects. The physical objects from which we could infer the presence of certain beliefs and *eo ipso* certain mental states are enumerated in the descending order of the ability to control them consciously and the capability to infer from

them the corresponding mental states (including doxastic states) in an accurate manner.

The better control over the means of expressions, the greater probability to see them used in deceitful practices. For example, the sentence "I love you" that a boy addresses a girl could express the feeling of love or just the boy's desire to have sexual intercourse with her. The declaration "I am for war" that a gray-headed Romanian made before the persons who asked him to sign the Stockholm Appeal (for banning nuclear weapons) did not express his stand on nuclear armaments, but his anger and defiant attitude against the Communist regime. Asked by a journalist about human nature, a priest would probably say "I strongly believe that man has an immortal soul" because he truly held this belief or mainly because he felt the pressure to give the "right" answer expected from a cleric. While drinking a beer with her friends, a person could say "I believe that all immigrants should be deported", but in front of the cameras, she will probably declare "I believe that immigrants are a blessing not a burden for our country." From which expression should one infer the person's genuine belief about the presence of immigrants in her country? Obviously, there is no definitive answer. It is highly improbable to infer rightfully a certain doxastic state from a single doxastic sentence (in the form of "I believe that…").

The authors who share a *dispositional conception of belief* (like Eric Schwitzgebel) consider that "to believe something is simply to be disposed to do and feel certain things in appropriate situations." (cf. Hunter 2011, 226) Unlike linguistic expressions, the *behavioral proclivities* would be hardwired in our body (mainly in our brain), and therefore, it would be more probable to be correlated with specific beliefs or doubts. Although plausible, this approach raises many issues. On the one hand, beliefs never *impel* us to act; they just *guide* us when we act. Let's imagine, for example, an individual who is on a sinking ship and strongly believes that the ship will soon reach the seabed. Could we predict his actions taking into account only his belief? Certainly not. In essence, his actions would depend on the intensity of his conflicting instincts and desires (especially his survival instinct and his attachment to some ideals or values) under those special circumstances. Not his beliefs, but his desires "tell" him *what* to do. If decided to die as a gentleman, he will choose *how* to die on the basis of all his doxastic states (including the belief that the ship will soon reach the seabed). The fact that our (non)conscious instincts and desires impel us to act, and our beliefs (or doubts) just guide us when we act helps us to explain some apparently

paradoxical situations, such as the followings: "A professed anti-racist exhibits racist tendencies in her everyday actions and emotions. A visitor steps hesitantly onto the glass Skywalk, declaring it perfectly safe. A phobic, avowing it safe, refuses to step onto the Skywalk at all. A movie-goer cries out as the shark lunges toward him. A committed hard determinist agonises over a decision on where to send his paper. A person reaches for a lightswitch to illuminate the very room whose bulb he declares broken." (Albahari 2014, 702) On the other hand, we are guided in any moment of our actions by a *web of heterogeneous beliefs*, not by a single belief. Who could pick out *the* belief that shapes a particular behavior? Who could tell us, for example, which beliefs (or doubts) could decisively influence the decision of a politician to return all money gained through corruption? It could be about an intricate web of religious, moral, political, or even esthetic beliefs.

Being more hardwired in our brain and body, some clusters of bodily reactions, the automated expressive reactions, and (especially) the neuro-physiological processes or events could be *in principle* associated with specific doxastic states. In other words, if known and exactly located, these objects would allow us to infer accurately the presence of certain beliefs or doubts, without the fear to be duped. However, *in practical terms*, it seems almost impossible to establish one-to-one correspondences between singular physical objects and singular beliefs. Perhaps this limit of human knowledge is beneficial for us. The knowledge of beliefs and doubts in terms of *natural causation* would incur terrible risks, namely the invasion of privacy and the biological manipulation of people by ruthless social engineers. The alternative route to knowledge in the doxastic domain requires us to infer beliefs and doubts mainly from linguistic expressions and (nonverbal) behaviors, in other words, from physical objects that admit a significant control of will, the possibility to deceive, and … the risk to be duped. This route demands us to use the language of praxeology in accordance with the following principle: "In the ordinary human relations one man is not permitted to control another except by persuasion" (Perry 1921, 148; cf. Fârte 2015, 153-154).

The second condition one should fulfill before trying to shape certain beliefs imposes – as a must – the ability to design as exactly as possible the intended result of change. Judging by appearances, this matter seems to be a petty issue. In fact, it is a real problem. Social institutions (family, school, church, government etc.) play a major role in the process of molding people's beliefs and assume this role explicitly.

However, they do not say plainly what kind of doxastic results are to be achieved; if they did, they would stir up controversies.

One of the problems at this point arises from new, revolutionary definitions that are given to some keywords. For example, Brian Zamulinski states that Protestant Christians don't strive for *belief*, but *faith* in the hope of salvation (Zamulinski 2008, 341-342). Belief is treated as "a[n involuntary] propositional attitude that ordinarily depends on what the believer takes to be evidence" and faith as "a commitment to a set of fundamental assumptions in the hope of salvation" (Zamulinski 2008, 341-342). Assumption is defined as "a proposition that is not believed but is nevertheless used as a guide for action with a view to achieving a particular aim." (Zamulinski 2008, 339). Seemingly innocuous, these amendments pose a serious challenge for all Christians, whether theologians or laypersons. If the Christians' target were faith (instead of belief), salvation would depend solely upon the Christians' willingness to perform or avoid the actions that a religious institution have prescribed in a presumed accord with a creed. The cognitive-affective assent would become unnecessary; much more, it would be even undesirable because in the absence of sufficient evidence Christians would fall into the trap of *overbelieving*, thereby damaging their standards of evidence.[5] (Zamulinski 2008, 343). From Zamulinski's perspective, Christians are not required in their religious life to form some beliefs and address some doubts. They need only a legalistic, conative commitment. If assumed, Zamulinski's distinction faith-belief changes radically both the doxastic goals and the religious conduct.

People also fail to design an appropriate result of doxastic change oscillating between changing beliefs, controlling the (linguistic) expressions of beliefs, and enforcing in a particular manner social discipline. In all human societies and in all historical periods, the most powerful institutions have administered social and legal punishments – ostracism, pecuniary and corporal punishments, or even the death penalty – for uttering or writing certain statements that seemed to express "socially unacceptable beliefs." The suppression of these manifestations could have the unrealistic doxastic goal to change or annihilate by force the so-called erroneous beliefs, the achievable but worthless goal to eradicate certain doxastic expressions from (public) social life, or the

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[5] Actually, any belief is partially justified by evidence. Only knowledge is fully confirmed by it. However, a belief can be considered overbelief only if it is based on insufficient (not partial) evidence. The so-called sufficient level of evidence is estimated depending on the spread of knowledge in society.

nondoxastic and immoral goal to strengthen a certain hierarchical structure. Who knows which goal were truly pursued by coercers during the repression of some doxastic expressions?

Any effective doxastic influence is based on good knowledge about the belief-producing/ changing mechanisms. Generally speaking, a *mechanism* works like a machine and can be defined as "a frequently occurring and easily recognizable causal pattern" (Elster, 2007, 37) or "an assemblage of components that transmit force, motion, and energy to each other to accomplish some task" (Thagard & Kroon 2006, 4). However, unlike machines, (natural) mechanisms "are not constructed by humans and have no human-contrived task" (Thagard & Kroon 2006, 5).

In order to comprehend how a mechanism works, we need to know its components, their properties, their relations to other parts, and the manner in which some changes to the properties and relations of the parts enable the mechanism to accomplish its tasks (Thagard & Kroon 2006,). Knowing the mechanisms that explain human thinking and the process of producing or changing doxastic states is a heavy burden because we have to deal with *feedback macro-mechanisms* composed of several cognitive, neural, molecular, and social mechanisms (Thagard & Kroon 2006, 7-8). Inasmuch as I've chosen to discuss the possibilities of changing beliefs in the language of praxeology and not in terms of natural causation, I will refer to a rough version of doxastic mechanism.

This mechanism works as a *response mechanism* that produces a *reaction* when it is *triggered* by a *stimulus*. It is important to note that an event or object (whether a sensory or psychological one) counts as stimulus only if at least one response to it is observable and measurable. It is also noteworthy that the reactions produced by the response mechanism could be physiological, emotional, cognitive, or conative. The variety of doxastic and pseudo doxastic reactions to internal or environmental stimuli (beliefs, misbeliefs, doubts, … on the one hand; tokens of ignorance, tokens of psittacism, delusions, "aliefs", "alien beliefs"… on the other hand) suggests that the doxastic response mechanism is in fact a *cluster of mechanisms* connected with other internal mechanisms. The mechanisms contained in this cluster can be *simple* or *complex*, *innate* or *acquired*, *hardwired* or *detached*, and *deterministic* or *wavering*. It is highly plausible that those mechanisms that are rooted in biological adaptation and underpin some survival strategies are rather simple, innate, hardwired and deterministic. In contrast with them, the response mechanisms governed to a significant extent by human conscience and human will are complex, acquired, relatively detached from visceral or

autonomic information processing, and highly variable in reactions.[6] The causal patterns from this last category play a prominent role in the cluster of doxastic mechanisms.

It should be added here that a response mechanism helps us to explain some changes of beliefs only if the following conditions are met: (1) the mechanism is *active*; (2) the trigger of mechanism is *sensitive*; (3) the stimuli are *observable* and *strong* enough to trigger the mechanism; and (4) the reactions are (at least in part) *observable* and *related to* stimuli inputs. Apart from few particular situations, one can ascertain only in a tentative manner (that is by trial and error) whether these conditions are met and, consequently, whether doxastic mechanisms really work.

It is true that this summary presentation of doxastic mechanisms refers rather to their general properties and conditions than their interrelated components. Due to the lack of knowledge about its internal workings, the cluster of doxastic mechanisms appears to be a *black box*. Moreover, being defined at a high level of abstraction, this doxastic macro-mechanism could be deficient in relevant variables. Nevertheless, the conceptual framework I sketched allows us to discuss fruitfully – in terms of *stimuli inputs* and *output reactions* – at least two belief-changing strategies, namely doxastic coercion and evidential persuasion.

Before discussing the two ways of using the belief-changing mechanism, it is important to note that not all people are able and motivated to influence the beliefs of their fellows. The competence in using doxastic mechanisms can be formed and developed in a very long period of study and practice. Actually, it is lost once we neglect its improvement. Because most people lack the physical and mental endurance required for such diligence, it is little wonder that the strategic influence on beliefs is exerted sporadically and has limited long-term effects. People's beliefs change predominantly at random, as part of a spontaneous order, in accordance with Leibniz's law of continuity and the principle of self-organization. So-called "opinion formers" very often pretend they would shape people's beliefs, but they cannot prove that the changes indicated were determined by their actions. In regard to the motivation for shaping the beliefs of others, it seems to be a growing trend for powerful institutions to focus on changing or suppressing some (linguistic) expressions of beliefs without trying to mold the beliefs themselves. Where only external conformity is required, the art of

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[6] The variability of reactions doesn't nullify the causal nature of mechanism. It only reduces our ability to recognize how the mechanism works.

changing persuasively people's beliefs by using consciously doxastic mechanisms is needless.

4. Doxastic Coercion vs. Evidential Persuasion

Both ways of using the belief-changing mechanism in order to shape beliefs and other doxastic states imply the problem of personal will and freedom.

The *human will* is not a directly observable phenomenon; its presence can be ascertained for sure solely in its relationships to some thoughts and desires. As a rule, our mind is constantly occupied with thoughts. Some thoughts come to mind apparently in an *automatic* manner as responses to certain events. Other thoughts arise seemingly *at random* or *spontaneously* as "the output of a broad category of uncontrolled and inaccessible higher order mental processes" (Morewedge et al. 2014, 1742) It is also possible to come in our mind (without being asked) recurrent, distressing thoughts that indicate in some cases the presence of an *obsessive* compulsive disorder. Finally, we also have *deliberate* thoughts that occur due to the capacity to control and direct our train of thoughts. The deliberate thoughts demonstrate the presence of the will, but also its limits. Our will has no control over the automatic, spontaneous, and obsessive thoughts, but it could shape to a significant extent our deliberate or conscious thoughts, mainly by (1) focusing our attention on particular ideas, (2) searching certain ideas in our memory, and (3) establishing logical correlations between our ideas. It is important to note that one's will cannot bring about thoughts … at will. It operates only on the content provided by the individual's memory, whether conscious or unconscious. For example, my will is unable to give me some ideas about tropical pitcher plants inasmuch as I have had no experience related to them until now.

By means of their will, people are also able to master their bundle of conflicting desires in order to achieve certain goals. The human will appears in the context of practical life as a desire for remote gratification, which "persists and predominates for a comparatively long period" (Hazlitt 1922) and contrasts with the fleeting, recurrent, or inconsistent desires. Its presence as a *second-order desire* (cf. Fârte 2015, 173) is proved by the existence of some thwarted desires that were in conflict with the superior, remote goal. The thwarted desires can be regarded as the price one paid for achieving the goal assumed by the will. For example, my will to finish this article is revealed by the fact that I stifled

my concurrent urge to go to bed despite the late hour. Sleep deprivation is a part of the price imposed by the will in order to reach its goals, namely to finish this article. Like in the context of theoretical life, the human will doesn't work arbitrarily and unconditionaly. Ultimately, the will is a desire, and as such it presupposes a natural inclination toward the goal assumed. No human being has such a will that he can pursue an unwanted, repugnant goal.

The human will rules the world of thoughts and desires as a constitutional king. It can control and direct one's thoughts and desires within a well-defined domain and in regard to a well-defined set of appropriate goals. In addition, the will is deeply affected by the shortcomings of human nature. It cannot be neither infallible nor omnipotent. Both in the field of thoughts and desires the will makes errors and displays weaknesses, especially when it is not vivid and powerful enough to be acted upon in preference to any other concurrent desire.

Before exploring possible routes to influence deliberately the beliefs of others, it is necessary to know how we can use our will on our own doxastic states. Firstly, it is safe to assume the well-known thesis of Bernard William that *beliefs aim at truth*. (cf. Vahid 2006, 303) Williams's claim implies neither there is a natural tendency of our beliefs towards truth nor people can hold solely correct beliefs, in other words, beliefs that have obiectively a true propositional content. All people have lots of erroneous beliefs that demand remedial actions and procedures simply because these beliefs cannot correct themselves. "Beliefs aim at truth" means that human beings cannot hold a belief unless they consider rightly or wrongly that its propositional content is true, that is in correspondence with reality. No person – no matter how corrupt she may be – can be bribed or threatened into giving her cognitive-affective assent to a proposition that she considers to be false. Neither money nor perception of threatening consequences can trigger the belief-producing mechanism so that it can produce the intended belief as output reaction. Therefore, money and the perception of threatening consequences should be treated as *indifferent variables*.[7]

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[7] Money is an indifferent variable in regard to belief-producing mechanism because it cannot bring about any belief. However, money is a very strong stimulus if the intended reaction is just to display some (linguistic) expressions of belief.If copiously bribed, unbelievers manifest the expressions of belief more enthusiastically than believers.

Inasmuch as we give up any belief *once* we realize that its popositional content is false[8], it is reasonable to assert that all human beings have the *innate drive* not to give their cognitive-affective assent to falsehood. They cannot use their will to thwart this innate urge no matter how strong the concurrent desires are. It also seems that the innate drive to reject the falsehood recognized as such regulates the intensity of our beliefs. "The intensity of belief correlates directly with the sentiment of being close to the truth and anchored in the objective reality". (Fârte 2015, 161)

Given the impossibility to believe a proposition recognized as a false one, any rational being who intends to form a belief intends *eo ipso* to form a *correct belief* (Owens 2003, 284), namely a belief whose propositional content corresponds as closely as possible to the state of affair it describes. Aiming to keep his beliefs closer to the truth and objective reality, he uses his willpower to shape the belief-producing/ changing mechanism in a *truth-conducive* one. If he did otherwise, he would risk forming incorrect beliefs that he should give up once the falsehood of their propositional content is recognized. It would be a waste of physical, affective, and cognitive resources.

In order to form *deliberately* a truth-conducive doxastic mechanism, we must take into consideration the proper means of getting such rational, correct beliefs, namely the *evidential reasons* and *evidential rules* (cf. Shah 2002, 442-443). The most basic aspect of the evidential reasons is given by their *empirical* character (cf. Pitkin 1906, 646). Evidential reasons are either empirical objects, states of affairs, events, situations, or theoretical, conjectural entities inferred in a reasoned manner from the former. In both cases, an empirical bedrock is available. Empirical things as such don't generate beliefs "in a mechanical or logical or psychological sense" (cf. Dewey 1906, 114) because they cannot trigger any belief-producing mechanism. Empirical entities get an evidential dimension, count as stimuli inputs, trigger doxastic mechanisms, and bring about doxastic reactions (including beliefs) only if they prove to be *character-laden objects*. In other words, evidential entities are not indifferent objects. They require attention, respond and provoke, help and hinder, disturb and pacify, resist and comply, are dismal, orderly and deformed, queer and commonplace, etc. (cf. Dewey 1906, 114). Rational believers do not restrict their attention to those empirical objects that instigate at present their belief, but they endeavor to

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[8] Because of nostalgia or by inertia people tend to display some expressions of beliefs even if they gave them up.

increase steadily the quantity of empirical doxastic stimuli by enlarging the scope of their practical experiences.

Being receptive and responding rapidly to an increasing number of environmental stimuli is not enough for acquiring evidential resons. It is also necessary to internalize a minimal set of evidential rules that correlate facts with beliefs and close the classes of beliefs under certain logical relations, in particular under deduction. The fact that a state of affairs justifies objectively a generic belief[9] does not make automatically a certain person hold this belief. In a similar vein, the fact that a state of affairs objectively justifies a doubt does not determine a certain individual to give up the corresponding belief. For example, the situation of Japan is objectively an evidential reason for the generic belief that over-indebtedness causes deflation, but it seems that Japanese politicians did not assume subjectively the correlation inasmuch as they fight with deflation by increasing public debt. Similarly, the objective fact that certain remains belong to a woman could not affect a credulous person's belief that it is about the relics of a holy man. In both cases, we can say that people did not *learn* the evidential rules that put in correspondence certain facts with certain beliefs or doubts.

The principle of closure states that "one is justified in believing the logical consequences, perhaps of a specified sort, of things one justifiably believes" (Feldman 1995, 487) and can get the following quasi-formal expression: *If S is justified in believing p and S knows that p logically implies q, then S is justified in believing q* (Feldman 1995, 487). First of all, if governed by the principle of closure, our belief-forming mechanisms become more reliable. It cannot be triggered by false evidence and does not produce beliefs with false propositional content or contradictory doxastic states. Added to that, the principle of closure allows us to assume − at least in a particular domain − an entire web of beliefs even though we are aware only of some of them. Being aware of a certain belief is an *event* that consumes inevitably a part of the believer's resources, both in physical and psychological terms. In order to economize its limited energy, any sound mind tends to keep most beliefs in a nonconscious state. If people tried deliberately to bring every belief in a conscious state, they would risk wasting all their physical and mental resources. Therefore, rational believers use their will for internalizing the principle of closure as a tool of mental efficiency. Taking logical

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9 *Generic belief* is an abstract construct designed to be held by an abstract human being, namely the undistinguished commoner lacking class or special attributes. Actually, all real beliefs are subjective phenomena that belong to particular persons.

exercises, they keep in the conscious mind only the most fundamental beliefs and let all other beliefs in the unconscious mind. Finally, rational believers use the principle of closure as a powerful device for discarding rubbish beliefs. Any sound mind mends continuously the entire web of beliefs trying to put in the trash those dubious beliefs that contradict our lively, strong, entrenched, central, and intense beliefs. (cf. Fârte 2015, 158-162) In general, the principle of closure does not let any belief in isolation and prevents the emergence of a "fragmented belief system" (cf. Reichenbach 2012, 236). However, if believers have a fragmented personality and adopt in different contexts divergent standards of evidence, it is inevitably to see the emergence of isolated beliefs and fragmented belief subsystems despite the principle of closure.

So far I have presented several ways in which rational people can control and direct their own belief-forming mechanisms and doxastic states through the intervention of their free will. In what follows, I will delineate two possible routes to influence deliberately the beliefs of others: *doxastic coercion* and *evidential persuasion*. Any agent of doxastic coercion acts – as a rule – on behalf of certain social institutions and endeavors to mold people's beliefs either ignoring their will or trying to subjugate it. On the contrary, a practitioner of evidential persuasion helps their fellows (in various contexts) to use freely their will in order to get correct beliefs in accordance with a proper standard of evidence.

The most common and used variant of doxastic coercion is also the less effective because it aims of stifling the "unacceptable beliefs" by eradicating some of their expressions from a certain sphere of social life. It is evident for all rational persons that any mental state has myriad of expressions. If some of them are repressed, other compensatory expressions emerge quickly. In addition, the holders of the unacceptable beliefs manage to create many alternative niches in which they ventilate their "heterodox" beliefs in a more dedicated manner. History proved that powerful institutions can temporarily find and punish people who expressed unacceptable (religious, political, cultural,…) beliefs, but they were not able to uproot them from people's mind. Why on earth would things be different today? Why do the new guardians of orthodoxy continue to fight for a lost cause?

The most effective but brutal form of doxastic coercion could take the form of biological manipulation given that the coercers know all one-to-one correspondences between singular physical objects or processes and singular beliefs. Fortunately, it is unlikely for the virtual coercers to manipulate exactly the cognitive, neural, molecular, and social

mechanisms that constitute the doxastic feedback macro-mechanism. However, it would be possible to manipulate biologically the "emotional tonality" of beliefs because the activity from certain brain regions seems to be selective enough for specific emotional states of mind, and any belief involves a form of affective assent.

The purpose of the next version of doxastic coercion is to prevent the formation of some undesirable beliefs by altering the available evidential reasons by informational deprivation. The scheme is realistic because the belief-formation mechanism cannot work without evidential reasons playing the role of input stimuli.

The goal can be achieved by blocking the free flow of relevant, factual information or, more wickedly, by flooding the most important channels of communication with torrents of junk data. The strategy meant to stem the information flow is typical for dictatorial or totalitarian regimes and succeeds on short-term. For example, communist regimes from Eastern Europe have restricted the sale of religious literature; thus, they did well in reducing the intensity of religious beliefs for decades. Nowadays some Muslim states apply the same strategy in regard to Christian religion. Ultimately, it is not possible to dam the information flow on long-term. A dam withstands better the pressure of water than the load of information (coming from outside).

The strategy of flooding the channels of communication with junk data is used mostly in the Euro-Atlantic area. Thousands of TV channels, radio stations, publications, out-of-home media and millions of websites spill nonstop a huge quantity of data over media's consumers. Overloaded with junk information, these people encounter difficulties in transforming disparate raw data in evidential reasons. It seems that people cope better with the scarcity of information than the information overload.

The following schemes of doxastic coercion rely on the ability of coercers to overwhelm the will of coercees in such manner that the latter activate their belief-formation mechanism to produce the intended beliefs. In what follows, it will be discussed two hypothetical ways to subjugate the will of people so that they could produce the doxastic reaction expected by coercers: direct doxastic coercition and indirect doxastic coercion.[10]

Direct doxastic coercion is based on a (too) strong analogy between action and belief. It is an undeniable fact that *direct practical coercion* succeed frequently in all human societies. When presented with a threat as consequence of performing an action, people tend to see it as a

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[10] The main source at this point is the article *Doxastic Coercion*, written by Benjamin McMyler. (McMyler 2011)

genuine reason for abstaining from this action. In a similar way a threat regarding the failure to perform an action is often a reason for performing the action. For example, almost all people abstain from uttering racist remarks on TV for fear of fine or imprisonment. The expected consequence of making racist remarks is a good reason for not making them. Unlike the belief-producing mechanism, the conative mechanisms allow people to perform unwanted actions required by coercers and motivated by the fear of consequences.

The mechanism of direct doxastic coercion is articulated by Benjamin McMyler as an adaptation of Robert Nozick' model of direct practical coercion:

"[A] speaker S directly doxastically coerces an audience A iff
1. S aims to cause A to believe that p
2. S indicates to A that if A does not believe that p, then S will bring about some consequence which would make A's not believing that p less desirable to A than A's believing that p
3. S's threat is credible to A
4. A believes that p
5. Part of A's reason for believing that p is to lessen the likelihood that S will bring about the consequence announced in (2)." (McMyler 2011, 544)

It is easily to remark that only the first three steps can be followed; the next two put an insurmountable barrier. As proved earlier, the belief-formation mechanism works exclusively on the basis of evidential reasons. Neither our desire nor the desires of others can trigger it. If not triggered, the doxastic mechanism has no doxastic output, in other words, it brings about no belief. Hence, direct doxastic coercion is impossible.

Arguing that "belief cannot be directly coerced by a threat which serves for the audience as a genuine reason for belief" (McMyler 2011, 539), Benjamin McMyler admits that "it can nevertheless be *indirectly* coerced by a threat which serves for the audience as a reason for acting to bring about the belief" (McMyler 2011, 539). There would be two possibilies. On the one hand, if the threat overwhelms the coercee's will and his deliberative capacity, the coercee would come to believe in a non-rationally manner. The coercee's belief would be "improperly grounded and unjustified" even if its propositional content were true (McMyler 2011, 539). In my opinion, believing in a non-rationally manner resembles Zamulinski's view on faith as a commitment to a set of proposition that are not believed but are nevertheless used as a guide for action. If an individual is not able to give his *cognitive* assent to a

proposition but only his non-rational commitment, he probably put lip service to coercer but actually doesn't believe. On the other hand, if the threat does not undermine the deliberative capacity of the coercee and his proper doxastic mechanism, it can influence – in part unconsciously – the coercee to look for those evidential reasons that support the belief desired to be formed. In this case, coercive threats seem to differ slightly from non-threatening warnings and non-coercive offers.

The epistemic and moral shortcomings of doxastic coercion could motivate people and social institutions to follow a non-coercive route to mold people's beliefs, namely *evidential persuasion*. This method of doxastic influence is based on the principles of symmetry and reciprocity in that it asks all persuaders to use for changing the beliefs of others only those means they used in forming their own belief respecting the freedom of will and assuming the standard of rationality. Normally, evidential persuasion should be not only more rational and moral than doxastic coercion, but also more effective.

Because I have shown at the beginning of this section how one can use his will on his own doxastic states, it could be a good idea to summarize several constitutive rules of evidential persuasion regarding the evidential reasons, belief-producing mechanisms, and beliefs as output reactions. These rules will delineate the boundaries of the area in which evidential persuasion can truly work.

1. *People should be exposed to empirical evidence*. The belief-producing/ changing mechanism proper to evidential persuasion can be triggered only by data on empirical objects, states of affairs, events, processes, situations, etc., or theoretical entities that are anchored in a factual substratum. It is the persuader's task to turn people's attention to them. The doxastic mechanism is totally closed to pure speculative evidence. Therefore, persuader has to find empirical substitute for them.

2. *People should be aware of their feelings toward empirical evidence*. On the one hand, the objects from one's environment instigate some of his beliefs, but on the other hand, they reflect what this person thinks or believes. To a certain degree, people could realize the "emotional tonality" of their beliefs on the basis of the emotion-charged stimuli from their environment. The emotion-charged stimuli also indicate possible obstacles in practicing evidential persuasion. Any person overwhelmed by emotions reasons badly. It is to note that people's doxastic mechanism cannot be triggered by indifferent evidence, no matter how relevant it could be objectively for shaping a belief. The

persuader should bring all available, relevant stimuli in a certain "emotional temperature" that facilitates the cognitive-affective processes.

3. *The persuader should help people establish personally logical relationships between certain evidence and certain doxastic states*. It is said that people perceive the objects directly, but they have to *learn* gradually the natural relationships between them. Myriads of sound correlations between certain ideas and the corresponding states of affairs are confirmed objectively, but unfortunately only few of them are recognized subjectively. The above-mentioned saying is all the more confirmed in doxastic context (especially in religious and political life) where people *see* the most astonishing correlations between facts and beliefs. It is a mammoth task for the persuader to break prudently these fallacious relationships and help people replace them by sound ones.

4. *The persuader should help people internalize the principle of closure*. Doing constantly logical exercises, people could put their doxastic mechanism and web of beliefs under useful deductive constraints. By means of these constraints, people get mental efficiency (keeping in the conscious mind only the most important beliefs), do not try to form beliefs based on false evidence, do not produce – as output reactions – beliefs with false propositional content, and are able to discard their junk beliefs.

5. Due in part to the principle of closure, evidential persuasion minimizes the risk of forming a fragmented personality, that is a personality who adopts in different contexts divergent standards of evidence, holds many isolated beliefs, and develops fragmented belief subsystems.

Obviously, evidential persuasion is not the only rhetorical procedure for changing people's beliefs, but surely it works well and helps people reach the highest possible standards of rationality and morality.

5. Conclusions

Given that powerful individuals and institutions tend to use coercion in all spheres of social life as a favorite shortcut to achieving their aims, I thought my article as an *inhibitor of coercion*. My goal seems to be all the more relevant when taking into account the fact that the agents of coercion tend to apply their inappropriate strategies in the field of doxastic states. In my article, I strove to demonstrate that doxastic coercion is both ineffective and harmful. It is unsuccessful because it does not match with the essential traits of beliefs and the belief-forming mechanisms. It is harmful because it undermines the epistemic and moral

standards of people, whether coercers or coercees. As a subjective hypercomplex system included in the hypercomplex network of reality, belief cannot be shaped at will or by coercive methods. Governed by Leibniz's law of continuity and the principle of self-organizing, belief can annihilate any ill-fitted input (coming from outside). Much more, it seems that human beings possess the innate drive not to give their cognitive-affective assent to the falsehood. No rational person can hold a belief after recognizing that its propositional content is false. Because of that, no coercer can mold a belief that is sensitive to truth, but a pseudo belief that is based on extrinsic reasons, and not on evidential reason. Conceived as an alternative to doxastic coercion, evidential persuasion produces correct beliefs in accordance with proper standards of evidence. It helps people reach the highest possible standards of rationality and morality. Evidential persuasion is based on the principles of symmetry and reciprocity in that it asks all persuaders to use for changing the beliefs of others only those means they used in forming their own beliefs respecting the freedom of will and assuming the standard of rationality.

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