

# **Believing, inquiring, and reactive attitudes**

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**Abstract:** This paper defends the view that believing some proposition P requires having closed inquiry into the relevant question of which P is a complete answer. The traditional motivation for such a view has rested primarily on our intuition about cases where it seems impossible (or irrational) to inquire while believing. I point out that the seeming possibility (and rationality) of double-checking what I believe seems to undermine this way of arguing for the idea that believing requires having closed inquiry. I thus give a new argument for this view based on the role that beliefs play in the formation of reactive attitudes and show that this argument (unlike the traditional arguments) allows us to respond to the problem that cases of double-checking pose.

## **Introduction**

Recently the idea that beliefs play a role in inquiry has become popular: Friedman (2019), Kelp (2021), Hieronymi (2008) and Staffel (2019) all discuss a view of belief according to which it's a function of belief to close inquiry into questions that we are interested in solving. However, in the current literature the motivation for such a belief-inquiry connection has rested largely on our intuitions about different cases, if it has been argued for at all. The problem with such an approach is that while it seems irrational for an agent to have a belief while continuing to inquire in some cases, there are many cases where it does not. This paper thus aims to provide a new argument for a belief-inquiry connection by considering the role that beliefs play in the formation of reactive attitudes. It proceeds as follows: Section 1 will spell out the view that beliefs ought to closing inquiry and give the traditional motivation for that view. I will point out that this way of motivating the view makes it difficult to respond to a natural and powerful worry that the view faces which I call the double-checking objection. Sections

2-3 introduce a new argument for the view that beliefs ought to close inquiry and further clarify this belief-inquiry connection. Section 4 will apply these insights to show how we can respond to the double-checking objection.

### **Section 1 - Believing and closing inquiry**

Several authors have recently argued for the idea that believing is incompatible with inquiring, since at least one of the roles of belief is to close inquiry. Friedman, for example, holds that “belief — the traditionalist’s ‘full’, ‘flat-out’ or ‘outright’ belief — should be thought of as playing a key role in our settling our inquiries.” (Friedman (2019), p. 296). Kelp holds that “one believes that *p*/not-*p* if and only if inquiry into whether *p* is closed for one in the affirmative/negative” (Kelp (2021), p. 368). And Staffel argues that “beliefs are only appropriate as terminal attitudes [in our reasoning]” (Staffel (2019), p. 281). There are two ways in which we can spell out such a belief-inquiry connection (according to which it’s a function of belief to close inquiry): in a normative and a descriptive way:

**Believing involves closing inquiry (BCI):** An agent believes some proposition *P* only if she has closed inquiry into some question *Q* (of which *P* is a complete answer) by settling *Q*.<sup>1</sup>

**Don’t Believe and Inquire (DBI):** One ought not to inquire into/have an interrogative attitude towards *Q* at *t* and believe *p* at *t*. (Friedman (2019), p. 303).

DBI holds that it’s irrational to inquire if we have a belief, whereas BCI advocates for a stronger connection between beliefs and closing inquiry whereby it’s not even possible to inquire if you have a belief. But why should we believe either of these principles?

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<sup>1</sup> BCI is not meant to entail that every belief is the result of a *process* of inquiry. A belief can settle a question that I have not asked myself before. I might turn around, see a green wall and form the belief “There is a green wall.” The question of what color the wall is is now settled for me, even though I was not antecedently engaged in any extended process of inquiring into what color the wall is.

Kelp and Hieronymi (who embrace something like BCI) do not provide a direct defense of the idea that beliefs require having closed inquiry, whereas Friedman and Staffel argue for these principles by considering different examples. Friedman for example uses the following case to argue for DBI:

**Inspector Morse:** Morse wakes up feeling disoriented. He cannot remember what he did last night. He notices with horror that his hands are full of blood. Thoughts of his killing his friend, the doctor, flood his mind. Morse's flat seems to confirm his memories, with evidence that he committed the crime in plain view. Suddenly his phone rings — the doctor has indeed been killed and Morse is called to the crime scene to investigate the crime. This confirms it, Morse thinks: I killed the doctor!  
(Adapted from Friedman (2019), p. 301)

Friedman's intuition about this case is that there would be something odd about Morse showing up at the crime scene and genuinely inquiring into who killed the doctor, given that he believes that he killed him. If Morse believes that he killed the doctor, he should not inquire further. We can see why this is true if we consider in more detail what genuine inquiry really involves. Friedman points out that an agent who genuinely inquires into some question Q displays a genuine desire to know the answer to Q. She adopts what Friedman calls an "interrogative attitude" with respect to Q. Examples of such attitudes might be wondering about Q or being curious about Q.

We can see why genuine inquiry requires such interrogative attitudes by considering the following case:

**Non-inquiring Morse:** Morse shows up at the crime scene, ready to do his job. He examines the clues left behind and interviews the witnesses — but he is doing these things merely to avoid suspicion and not to solve the question of who committed the crime.

Non-inquiring Morse is merely going through the motions — he performs the activities that a genuine inquirer usually performs, but he doesn't have the right goal or mental attitude to count as genuinely inquiring. It's only if he adopts a particular interrogative attitude with respect to the question of who killed the doctor and is trying to answer it that he counts as genuinely inquiring.<sup>2</sup>

Once we realize that genuine inquiry consists at least in part of the agent adopting an interrogative attitude with respect to Q, then it becomes clear why it would be irrational for Morse to believe that he killed the doctor while at the same time genuinely inquiring into who killed him. This is because to be genuinely inquiring, Morse must take a genuine interrogative attitude with respect to the question of who killed the doctor — he must wonder or be curious about who killed him, for example. But it would seem irrational for Morse to have any of these attitudes while believing that it was he himself who killed the doctor. The case of Morse thus supports DBI.

There are two problems with basing the case for a belief-inquiry connection on examples like Morse's. The first problem is this: While Friedman takes the example of Morse to motivate merely DBI, it seems to me that the example could equally be taken to support the (descriptive) BCI. Someone who takes this example to support BCI might point out that it's difficult to even imagine how a Morse who wonders about whether he killed the doctor could even count as genuinely believing that he does. Suppose Morse confides the following to another close friend: "I believe that I killed the doctor, but I still wonder whether I did." Our first thought wouldn't be that Morse is irrational in having these attitudes, but rather that Morse is misreporting his attitudes: Either he doesn't really believe that he killed the doctor (he only suspects) or he isn't really wondering about it at all. If some attitude (or combination of attitudes) is merely irrational rather than impossible, it is usually not very difficult to imagine an agent

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<sup>2</sup> Friedman expands on the role inquiry plays in epistemology in Friedman (2017) and (2020). In the rest of this paper, I'll take it for granted that genuine inquiry involves interrogative attitudes since BCI and DBI seem only plausible if inquiry does involve interrogative attitudes. Others, however, have challenged the assumption that inquiring needs to involve interrogative attitudes (see Palmira (2020) and Falbo (forthcoming)).

having the irrational attitude (or combination of attitudes). It is not usually difficult, for example, to imagine an agent who holds a particular belief that is not supported by her evidence. The fact that it is so difficult to imagine Morse genuinely inquiring into who killed the doctor while believing that he killed him seems to suggest that it is impossible for him to do this, and thus arguably supports BCI. The first problem is thus that cases like Morse's can't tell us exactly which version of the belief-inquiry connection we ought to embrace - BCI or DBI.<sup>3</sup>

The second problem with basing the case for the belief-inquiry connection on intuitions about cases is that that inquiring while believing does not seem obviously irrational or impossible in all situations. Consider for example the following case:

**Double-checking Morse:** Morse is engaged in a routine investigation and he believes he found the murderer: The gardener did it. Nevertheless, there are two more witnesses to interview and so Morse continues to inquire further just to make sure.

Unlike in the previous example, it does not seem obviously strange to imagine that Morse believes the gardener did it and yet he engages in further inquiry to confirm his belief. It may seem that Morse can inquire further into who committed the murder even after he has formed a belief, as long as he is merely trying to double-check or confirm a belief that he already has. Cases like this thus seem to pose a counterexample to BCI and DBI — we can call this the double-checking objection.

Several authors have recently appealed to cases like the one above, where an agent double-checks or confirms a belief that she holds, in order to put pressure on the idea

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<sup>3</sup> See also Lee (forthcoming) for an argument that Friedman's case for DBI really supports a descriptive claim like BCI. Friedman thinks that inquiring while believing is possible in cases where an agent cannot access P temporarily. However Archer (2018) points out that such cases might actually pose counterexamples to DBI as well because it seems rational for an agent who temporarily forgot P to inquire into it. Thus I think it is best to consider agents who can't access some of their beliefs as mentally fragmented along the lines of Lewis (1982) and hold that no fragment is inquiring while believing.

that beliefs close (or ought to close) inquiry (see Millson (2021), Falbo (forthcoming), and Woodard (ms.)). A defender of BCI or DBI might respond to cases like the one above by simply denying that a double-checking Morse really believes that the gardener did it (Millson and Friedman for example consider this response), or that a double-checking Morse really counts as inquiring. As it stands, however, such responses seem ad hoc. Naively, double-checking Morse seems to have a belief, and these authors don't give us a reason for thinking that this initial impression is mistaken — other than the fact that doing so allows us to hang on to DBI and BCI. If the case for DBI and BCI merely rested on intuitions about cases in the first place, such a response is questionable at best.

In light of this, this paper tries to make progress in three ways. First, it gives a new argument for a belief-inquiry connection that does not rely merely on intuitions about cases like Morse's (Section 2). Second, it argues that this motivation gives us a reason to accept BCI rather than merely DBI (Section 3). Third, it shows how this argument can help us give a principled response to the double-checking objection (Section 4).

## **Section 2 — Beliefs and reactive attitudes**

We can give a new argument for the belief-inquiry connection if we consider the role that beliefs play in the formation of our reactive attitudes. What I want to argue is that beliefs can only play this role if believing involves closing inquiry. We thus have the following argument for the idea that there is a strong, descriptive connection between belief and closing inquiry (namely BCI):

Premise 1: Beliefs are the mental state that licenses reactive attitudes.

Premise 2: If believing did not involve closing inquiry, then beliefs would not be the mental state that licenses reactive attitudes.

Conclusion: Believing involves closing inquiry.

Let's discuss the two premises in turn:

### **Premise 1: Beliefs are the mental state that licenses reactive attitudes**

Lara Buchak (2014) has argued that one of the functions of beliefs is to enable us to form reactive attitudes like praise and blame about others. She notes that whether I can appropriately blame (or praise) someone for a particular action will depend on whether I have a belief that someone performed an objectionable (or praiseworthy) action. In particular Buchak proposes the following norm:

**Blame Norm:** Blame someone if and only if you believe (or know) that she transgressed, and blame her in proportion to the severity of the transgression. (Buchak (2014), p. 299).

The blame norm essentially states that it is outright belief, not the having of a high credence alone, that licenses the forming of reactive attitudes like blame. This means that whether it's appropriate for an agent to blame someone, for example, will depend on whether they have a (rational) belief that the other person transgressed. (I will remain agnostic about whether beliefs as such license reactive attitudes or whether only *rational* beliefs do so.)<sup>4</sup>

Why is it beliefs, rather than credences, that license reactive attitudes? We can see why this is by considering a case where beliefs and high credences come apart:<sup>5</sup>

**iPhone:** You leave the seminar room to get a drink, and you come back to find that your iPhone has been stolen. There were only two people in the

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<sup>4</sup> Note that in order for me to appropriately blame someone, further external conditions have to also be met. I as a third party might lack standing to blame someone, or they might have a good excuse for their transgression. (See for example Smith (2007) and Cohen (2006) for relevant discussions.) In what follows I will simply assume that the external conditions for the having of reactive attitudes (whatever they are) are met.

<sup>5</sup> The following discussion assumes that the "Lockean Thesis" is false and that high credences and beliefs can in fact come apart. This assumption strikes me as natural within the framework in which we are working, since DBI and BCI are only plausible if the Lockean Thesis is false. After all, it seems that no credence below 1 antecedently makes further inquiry irrational.

room, Jake and Barbara. You have no evidence about who stole the phone, and you don't know either party very well, but you know (let's say) that men are 10 times more likely to steal iPhones than women. I contend that this isn't enough to make you rationally believe that Jake stole the phone. (Buchak (2014), p. 292)

iPhone is a case where your credence that Jake stole the phone is very high (higher than 0.9). Now, suppose that you respond to the example by refraining from believing that Jake stole the phone as Buchak thinks you should. Would it be appropriate for you to blame Jake on the basis of your high credence alone?

Buchak argues that the answer is no. Without a (rational) belief that Jake stole your phone, blaming him would be inappropriate. It's important to notice however that what renders it inappropriate for you to blame Jake in this case is simply the fact that you don't believe he's guilty and not that your credence in his guilt is too low to license blame. To see this, imagine your friend Peter saw Jake steal the phone and told you about it. Suppose in response to Peter's testimony you form a belief that Jake stole your phone — it would not seem similarly inappropriate for you to blame Jake in this case. And this might be despite the fact that (since you think reports like Peter's are only accurate in 90% of cases) you only have a credence of 0.9 in the claim that Jake stole your phone in this case as well. This suggests therefore that it's beliefs and not merely high credences that license reactive attitudes. But this raises the question: in virtue of which feature is it that beliefs are able to license reactive attitudes? I want to argue that this feature is that beliefs involve closing inquiry.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> More needs to be said for a full defense of the claim that it's (rational) beliefs that license blame. Those unconvinced by Buchak's example alone can read the paper as making a conditional claim: If beliefs license reactive attitudes, then BCI follows. Since the antecedent seems initially plausible, this conditional claim is still interesting.

**Premise 2: If believing did not involve closing inquiry, then beliefs would not be the mental state that licenses reactive attitudes.**

My argument for premise 2 is this:

- (1) It's not appropriate for me to blame someone for some action A before I've closed inquiry into whether the person did A.
- (2) If belief did not involve closing inquiry, then it would be possible to believe some proposition P and inquire into whether P.
- (3) If it were possible to believe P and inquire into whether P, but it is inappropriate to blame someone while one is inquiring into whether P, then there could be a situation in which one believes that someone performed A and yet it is not appropriate to blame them (that is, where one's belief does not license reactive attitudes like blame).
- (4) Thus: If believing did not involve closing inquiry, then beliefs would not be the mental state that licenses reactive attitudes (such as blame).

I take premises 2 and 3 of the above argument to be uncontroversial. The key insight is premise 1: that it is not appropriate to blame someone while one continues to inquire into whether they committed the action that we are blaming them for.

In order to see that this is true, consider again the example of the stolen iPhone: Suppose I start an inquiry and aim to figure out who stole the phone. I have a suspicion that Jake stole the phone but I'm still gathering more evidence. It would surely be premature to blame Jake before I have fully closed inquiry into whether he really stole my phone - Jake deserves a full inquiry before I start to blame him. It would be premature of me to blame him while I'm still wondering whether he really took it or take any other interrogative attitude towards the question. It's only when I have settled the question of whether Jake really stole my phone that I can appropriately start to blame him.

Since blame is not appropriate when one is inquiring, it follows that the only way beliefs can license reactive attitude (as they seem to do) is because believing some proposition involves having settled the relevant question and closed inquiry.

### **Section 3 - Choosing between BCI and DBI**

Can DBI explain the fact that an agent who inquires cannot rationally blame others? At first glance one might think that it could. Suppose (for argument's sake) that it is only *rational* belief that licenses blame. Could we then not simply say that an agent who believes that Jake stole the phone while inquiring is irrational (due to DBI) and hence her belief does not license blame?

But this response is too quick. Suppose (contrary to BCI), that I can believe that Jake stole the phone and still wonder about whether he stole it. Having this combination of attitudes might make *me* irrational. But notice that it wouldn't make *my belief* on its own irrational since DBI is a wide-scope norm. As such, DBI requires me either to drop my belief or drop my interrogative attitude. So I could comply with DBI by simply dropping my interrogative attitude and breaking off my inquiry into whether Jake stole the phone without having settled the question. Would this make it now rational for me to blame Jake? It seems to me the answer is still no. If I haven't closed my inquiry properly by settling the question then blame is still inappropriate. So it's not merely the stopping of inquiry that's required for blame — it's the answering for myself of the relevant question that is required. And so if belief is to be the mental state that licenses blame then belief has to involve *closing* inquiry in the sense specified by BCI.

### **Section 4 - Responding to the double-checking objection**

Let us now turn to the case of a double-checking Morse. As I pointed out in section 1, it seems initially plausible that double-checking Morse both genuinely believes that the gardener committed the murder and genuinely inquires into who committed the crime. However, once we realize that beliefs license reactive attitudes, we can see that our initial impression that Morse believes the gardener is the murderer must be mistaken.

In order to see this, suppose that double-checking Morse is genuinely inquiring into who committed the murder in the sense that he has an interrogative attitude towards that question: He is curious to see whether it was really the gardener who committed the crime or not after all someone else. It seems that as long as Morse has such an interrogative attitude towards whether it is really the gardener, it would be inappropriate for him to (say) blame the gardener for committing the murder. Just like he should wait to put the gardener on trial until he is finished double-checking, he should wait to form a reactive attitude about the gardener until he finishes his investigation. But if it would be wrong for Morse to form a reactive attitude in this situation, this suggests that Morse doesn't really believe that the gardener committed the crime (since a belief would license blame). At most, then, Morse has a high credence or a hypothesis that the gardener committed the crime.

The upshot therefore is this: Recognizing that it would be inappropriate for Morse to blame the gardener while he double-checks gives us a principled reason to claim that Morse doesn't actually believe that the gardener committed the crime. He might have a high credence or a hypothesis that the gardener did it, but he does not yet have an outright belief: for if he did, there wouldn't be a problem blaming the gardener. Thus, taking account of the connection between beliefs and reactive attitudes motivates the otherwise ad hoc claim that double-checking Morse does not count as believing that the gardener did it, and more generally, that an agent who is genuinely double-checking must lack the relevant belief. This is because agents who are genuinely double-checking are not licensed to form reactive attitudes in the way that agents who hold genuine outright beliefs are.<sup>7</sup>

## **Conclusion**

I have given a new argument to support the idea that believing involves closing inquiry and shown how we can respond to an important objection to this view. Moreover,

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<sup>7</sup> I am assuming throughout that double-checking Morse is genuinely inquiring and adopts an interrogative attitude towards the relevant question. Of course if double-checking Morse is like non-inquiring Morse in that he is merely going through the motions but displays no curiosity about who committed the crime, then Morse might really have a belief that the gardener did it. But in this case double-checking Morse won't present a counterexample to BCI and DBI either, since he isn't genuinely inquiring.

notice that due to the double-checking objection, the idea that beliefs involve closing inquiry is actually the more controversial direction of a biconditional principle linking beliefs and closed inquiry. For if the goal of inquiring into some question Q is to know the answer to Q, then closing inquiry into Q will involve believing some proposition P that answers Q (since without believing that P we could not know the answer to Q). Thus, what arguably emerges is an even stronger connection between believing and inquiring than BCI, according to which an agent believes some proposition P iff she has closed inquiry into some question Q (of which P is a complete answer) by concluding that P.

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