

Commitment and Reasons—A Comment on Ruth Chang, “Three Dogmas of Normativity”

Peter Railton

University of Michigan

Introduction

I was tempted to begin this response to Ruth Chang’s masterly essay by saying that it is testimony to how far a creative mind can go with good idea—reaching all the way from the foundations of the theory of value and rational action to decision theory to the ethics of international relations and artificial intelligence, all growing out of an original insight about choice situations where options are “on a par”, albeit not strictly comparable. However, on reflection, I realized that one more element needs to be added to account for how far Chang has gone with this idea, an element Chang has helped us to see and understand, and that she has contributed through her own agency: *commitment* undertaken when the choice of philosophical projects was not settled by “given” reasons.

After all, genuinely novel philosophical projects don’t readily lend themselves to expected value calculations of their prospects—there will be a number that seem feasible at a given time, each with some intuitive plausibility and some promise that they’d enable us to make progress on some outstanding philosophical problems. But *how* intuitive, *how* plausible, *how* promising, *which* problems, *how* important are the problems, *how* to trade off plausibility and ambition, and so on? We’d be kidding ourselves to think we could identify a uniquely-favored answer about which “substantive normative considerations” (as Chang helpfully calls them) are relevant and how they are to be weighted and combined to yield a univocal ranking. And we’d equally be kidding ourselves if we thought that these projects have equal expected value, so that we can, as rational agents, assure ourselves that it is indifferent which we’d choose—or that discovering some small normative consideration that favors one over the others would establish that reason uniquely favors it. This does not seem to be the way things are when we contemplate such choices as embarking on philosophical projects, or finding a partner, or choosing a career. There may be two or more choices “on a par”, none clearly dominating, and yet we must choose one among them if we are to have a philosophical project, or a partner, or a career at all. How then do we choose?

Chang came to think that there must be something more that reason can do in cases where the choices are “on a par”—it need not flip a coin or sit back passively and wait to see what stray normative consideration might arise to determine for us what it’s rational to do with our lives. Reason can, she think, be *active* and *self-defining* in such situations. As rational *agents*, we have a distinctive role to play. We can, she believes, make a *commitment* to an option through exercise of our will, and this can be a source of reasons that make this the best choice. We

This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the Version of Record. Please cite this article as doi: [10.1111/japp.12649](https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12649)

This article is protected by copyright. All rights reserved.

need not simply be a receptacle to, or mirror of, reasons that present themselves to us—we can *make* reasons by committing. This is a fundamental “normative power” of agency that, she believes, plays a vital role in our lives and yet is missing from more orthodox accounts of rational choice. It is missing in part because conventional wisdom accepts, implicitly or explicitly, “three dogmas of normativity” as framing the space within which solutions to problems of rational choice must be found.

Chang’s “Three Dogmas” paper brings together various strands of her research to present an overall picture of what she is criticizing in conventional wisdom, and what she is proposing to enlarge the space of possible answers to questions about what we have reason to do. She is not here trying to convince us to abandon the three foundational dogmas she diagnoses, but rather to provide “modest reason[s] to doubt” the dogmas, or at least not close our minds to the possibility that they are mistaken [19].¹ In this, it seems to me, she is quite successful. And here is where her own commitment, squarely in the face of orthodoxy, comes in—commitment to exploring a part of the philosophical landscape others have taken to be off limits, and to the hard work needed to discover and illuminate the insights she finds there.

I would like to understand that landscape better, and appreciate the force of these insights more fully. In this reply I will be responding primarily from a meta-normative perspective, from which it seems to me there is something right and important in Chang’s account of choice, and in her advocacy of an active conception of rationality. I here have space only to consider two elements of her ambitious essay, the first and third purported dogmas and her alternatives. I must confess at the outset that I don’t know the whole of her work, and so I might unfortunately be rehearsing issues already resolved elsewhere. I will be suggesting what seems to me a potential way of understanding and perhaps buttressing some of her insights, though I cannot be sure this way of approaching them is one she’d accept. At the end, I’ll also suggest a “fourth dogma of normativity” that I believe her work helps us to unearth, question, and find alternatives to.

The first dogma

Let’s begin with “the first dogma of normativity”, that first-order normative claims can be true or false *simpliciter*, without relativization to “ordinary substantive normative considerations”. On her view, first-order normative claims are simply incomplete (and so *a fortiori* not truth-evaluable) unless implicitly or explicitly “relativized” to some substantive normative considerations or purposes. There is no common magnitude or metric of “absolute normativity”, neither is there a “super-consideration” or constellation of all substantive normative considerations that could support univocally true relativized first-order normative

¹ Page numbers in square brackets refer to the manuscript version of Chang’s essay, “Three Dogmas of Normativity”.

claims. This leads, she believes, not to nihilism about reasons, but to recognizing an irreducible plurality of reasons and values. Multiple “ordinary substantive normative considerations” can supply “covering considerations” relative to which more definite evaluative comparisons can be made [11], and these considerations can be more or less relevant in any given choice situation. Our familiar ways of talking about one option or another having the “highest expected value”, or being “best supported by reasons, all things considered”, is intelligible because such statements—like comparative statements more generally—are functioning as “shorthand” for statements relativized to a contextually- or commonsensically-presupposed set of considerations or standards.

Chang gives as an example the seemingly commonsensical, unqualified normative truth that, ‘Human life is more valuable than cockroach life’. In a typical context, such a statement is tacitly relativized to something like “with respect to the realization of widely-recognized values—justice, knowledge, moral goodness, beauty, etc.”, or “with respect to the richness of conscious experience”. However, in light of certain other, less commonly considered substantive normative considerations, cockroach life might well be more valuable than human life—Chang suggests, for example, “with respect to the preservation of life in the event of an all-out nuclear war”. How important would that be in relation to the values promoted more fully by human survival? In some very unfortunate contexts, perhaps desperately more important. Normative deliberation cannot in good faith deny that “all things considered” is in practice limited by particular contexts and concerns, and that we must in some cases face “neglected, difficult questions about the normative relations that might hold among ordinary substantive normative considerations” [8n] in other contexts or relative to other concerns.

I am wondering, though, how we are to understand the status of relativized claims about normativity—what kind of relativization is involved and what normative force is being supposed for the ordinary substantive normative considerations themselves? In the preliminary “ground-clearing” for this essay, Chang specifies that her interest is “the normativity of normative reasons”, citing Parfit [2011]. This “strong sense” of normativity is in contrast with the normativity of “mere norms, rules”, practices, and so on [3]. For example, if someone watching a baseball game asks whether it is true that:

(1) “A runner who has taken a lead from a base must retag the base in the case of a pop fly that is caught”,

the answer is “yes”, relative to the rules of baseball. But the rules of baseball do not have normative force on their own—they apply to us only insofar as we are playing baseball. To see whether we have any normative reason to follow the ‘must’ in (1), we’d have to see which substantive normative considerations might be at stake in playing baseball and in following this rule, and how important they are in relation to one another. Is that puzzling? After all, if we follow too few of the rules, we aren’t playing *baseball* at all, so anyone playing baseball *must* follow the rules to a significant degree. But this ‘must’, too, isn’t strong, since it depends upon

whether some ordinary substantive normative considerations favor playing baseball, and how they stand in relation to other ordinary substantive normative considerations. The “practice-based” or “rule-based” normativity of (1) is closer to a descriptive claim about what the baseball rule-book says than to an “action-guiding” or “ought-implying” normative claim about how we are to act or be. So we say:

(2) “Relative to the rules of baseball, a runner who has taken a lead from a base must retag the base in the case of a pop fly that is caught.”

Yet even if (2) is true, it, too, does not have strong normative force—accepting (2) implies no action-guiding *ought*. Now consider the relativized claims that it would seem Chang suggests we substitute for unqualified or absolute value claims:

(3) “Human life is more valuable than cockroach life relative to the quality of conscious experience” [cf. 5]

(4) “Cockroach life is more valuable than human life with respect to the value of the survival of life on Earth in the event of a nuclear holocaust” [cf. 11].

Statements (3) and (4), too, are quasi-descriptive statements of a relationship that does not imply any action-guiding *ought* about what we should do. In this case, they report a relationship of congruence between a value or purpose and an assessment of a possible action, without endorsing the evaluation, purpose, or action as normative for us.

How then can we say that the relativization Chang invokes could support a distinctive form of “strong” normativity as an alternative to “absolute normativity”? One might respond that this way of setting up the question is misleading—the issue isn’t really about the logic of *ought*, but about how “ordinary substantive normative considerations”, which can be genuine goods rather than arbitrary rule-books or social conventions, can confer some normative force upon that which is appropriately related to them, even in the absence of “absolute” normativity. Relativization draws our attention to the fact that, as Chang sees things, strong normativity is “fragmented” [25] rather than global—but if *genuinely* normative considerations are present, normative reasons are not absent.

For this reply to work, however, we must assume that the substantive normative considerations—or at least the most general or highest-order substantive normative considerations—possess some form of strong normativity they do not borrow from some yet further consideration or purpose, on pain of regress. So it does not seem that Chang’s account of relativized normativity can dispense altogether with the “dogma” of non-relativized normativity, e.g., for such general normative considerations as “justice” and “beauty” [cf. 2]. Chang recognizes that regress problems can arise, and does not outright reject addressing them by allowing “absolute” normativity at a higher-order level:

Since [this essay's] concern is only with first-order normative claims, it leaves open the possibility that higher-order normative claims are absolute (a possibility that helps to block regress worries that might arise if one rejects the first dogma, as I suggest we should, in favour of the view that all normative claims are relativized to ordinary substantive normative considerations). [5n]

We might not possess knock-down arguments for absolute normativity, but no philosopher, to my knowledge, has thought their way out of the need to find some *original, non-derivative* normativity somewhere in the normative scheme if regress or skepticism are to be avoided. Let us call *original, non-derivative* normativity “the first form of absoluteness”. It can be found in philosophers as diverse as Aristotle, Kant, and Moore.

Grounds of action—say, reasons or values—that possess “absolute” normativity of this first form need not, however, possess another sort of “absoluteness”, namely, standing in something like a comprehensive univocal order of priority or metric of comparative magnitude. Let us call this “the second form of absoluteness”. Since the fragmentation of reasons requires denying only the second form of absoluteness, Chang’s account of relativized normativity need not undermine the possibility of absoluteness of the first form—and a good thing, since rejecting the first form would threaten her own ability to capture strong normativity.

For example, among the reasons Chang gives for doubting the dogma of “absolute normativity” is the problem of accounting for “the diversity of values, reasons, and normative elements in general ... in absolute claims” (8). She goes on to say:

As Aristotle pointed out long ago, good things are often good in different ways, and it is a mystery how it can make sense to compare diverse goods in absolute terms. [8]

Such plurality is quite compatible with different “ways of being good” possessing intrinsic value, and so not being good only relative to certain considerations, purposes, or contexts. One might think, for example, that relational claims about what is “good *for*” a particular person or species will be true because it is a good thing, *sans phrase*, when this individual or species receives what is good for them. Or, we might join with those virtue theorists who think there is an irreducible plurality of virtues, each good in itself, but potentially conflicting in relation to a given action—what is most just might not be what is most beneficent—and not situated within a unified metric or all-purpose ordering of priority. Still, the virtues—or their associated values or obligations—might possess absolute normativity of the first form, since each possesses original, non-derivative normativity or value. Chang says that “you have no absolute rights” or obligations [11]. But a normative theorist like W.D. Ross, inspired in part by Aristotle, can agree with this claim when we are speaking of absolute normativity of the second form, while insisting that we should recognize absolute normativity of the first form: there exist multiple

original and underived *pro tanto* obligations, not admitting of cancellation even in conflicts, but also not admitting of universal principles of priority. Why insist on absolute normativity of the first form even if one denies for the second form?—Because accurately representing our fundamental understanding of the realm of duties, values, or reasons may require this. For example, many have thought Ross' account of our obligations comes closest to capturing our ordinary ethical understanding of duties, and this would explain the common-sense idea that certain rights or obligations *are* absolute, and *always* need to be taken seriously into account, even though it is widely recognized that no rights or obligations can be absolute in the sense of always claiming priority.

Don't systems of obligations, virtues, etc., presuppose certain kinds of social structures or relations, such that obligations or virtues must be "relativized" in that sense? One can still champion the idea that certain values, virtues, or reasons possess absolute normativity of the first form if one recognizes that, for any setting where these values, virtues, or reasons *could* apply, they do apply. That seems to be Ross' view. And this is akin to another paradigm source of absolute normativity of the first form: agonizing pain or suffering (Nagel, 1986; Parfit, 2011). Not every living thing can experience agony, but for any being that can, there is original, non-derivative disvalue in that experience *as such*, and a strong normative reason to prevent it, other things equal. Even the retributivist who favors returning harm for harm presupposes something like this—if suffering agony is what is deserved by someone who has wrongfully inflicted agony, that is because agony is, in itself, a "way of being bad" for those moments in the life for the person when it is undergone. The fact that the agony would be *morally* appropriate does not reverse its inherent negative valence or make it good in itself. Still, this does not entail that agony has absolute normativity of the second form—perhaps even different forms of pain (physical, psychic, social, etc.) do not admit of a context-independent evaluative ranking.

As far as I can see, Chang's thesis of the "fragmentation" of value or reasons, and many of her most persuasive arguments and examples, call for us only to deny absolute normativity of the second form while accepting it in the first form. This would enable Chang's critique to gain significant traction against decision-theoretic orthodoxy, while not threatening to undermine her own account of relativized normativity.

The third dogma

The "third dogma" of normativity, accord to Chang, is that:

Normativity is always given to us and never created by us; that is, the ground of a reason or value is never under our direct volitional control. [18]

In direct defiance of this dogma, Chang has forcefully argued, and argues here, that agents can *create* reasons—indeed, “*strong*” and *binding* reasons—through the exercise of direct volition or will.

Of course, it has long been recognized that one can create certain kinds of binding reasons through such exercises of agency as promising, pledging, or taking an oath—at least so long as certain conditions of non-coercion, awareness, etc., are met—, though controversies abound about the best explanation of this bindingness, and its content and reach. However, Chang does not think promising, pledging, etc., are models of the creation of “strong” reasons by the will:

When I promise to wash your car tomorrow, I ‘create’ an obligation for myself to wash your car tomorrow, *ceteris paribus*. But as promises are typically understood, this is an anemic sort of creation; I simply trigger a preexisting perhaps conditional reason to wash your car grounded in the value of the promising institution. [25n]

On her account, the will itself, without needing to draw upon other sources of normative reasons, can *create* reasons that “make it true for [oneself] that [one] has most reason to pursue one course of action over another”, at least when options are “on a par” [25].

Another contrast with Chang’s view can be seen in cases where options are initially “on a par”, but an act of will in choosing can also almost immediately change the reasons we have by altering the external or internal *situational facts* in which we find ourselves. Once Buridan’s donkey starts trundling toward to the left-side haystack, the cost of choosing the right-side haystack has increased, breaking the original tie between the haystacks and making it true that it has more reason to favor the haystack actually chosen; and once I have finally made up my mind to study law rather than philosophy, then I have made it true that reconsideration is a cost that favors sticking with chosen course of action, other things equal. Moreover, the asymmetry in reasons thus created is not something one can simply will not to exist—it has taken on a life of its own. Thus do donkeys and decisions through voluntary acts help make true claims about the course of action the agent has most reason to pursue.

But if I understand her aright, Chang’s idea of “will-based” reasons is different from such *ex post* consequences of the decision as well. “Will-based” reasons do not await consequences of one’s willing—they are contemporaneous creations spontaneously brought into existence by *committing* to one option rather than another. This sounds to my ear as if the exercise of the agent’s will in choice is a source of *original, non-derivative, strong normativity*, that is, absolute normativity of the first form. This would be yet another reason for restricting the “first dogma” to absolute normativity of the second form.

However that might be, let us look more closely at *how* a commitment to one option can, by itself, make it a better option when before it was only “on a par” with other options. Chang recognizes that this view is heretical, and suggests that one source of opposition is a “scientific” importation of features of theoretical reasons into practical rationality, even though beliefs (the objects of theoretical rationality) are capable of truth or falsity, but intentions or actions (the objects of practical rationality) are not. [3]. And a telling sign of this fundamental difference between theoretical and practical reason is that, in uncoerced circumstances, we can select an act at will, but cannot believe at will.

Chang needs a somewhat stronger claim, however. Volition and commitment, on her account, must not only be able directly to determine what we do, they must also be able directly to determine what we have *reason* to do, and statements about our reasons *can* be true or false. So the will would have to be capable of creating truths, but not via the processes mentioned above of changing our situation or triggering pre-existing conditional obligations. What would creating such truths involve? On typical externalist views, reasons-claims are made true by *facts*, e.g., about what is good or harmful; on typical internalist views, reasons-claims are made true by *belief-desire* pairs. Since, as Chang notes, not only beliefs, but desires as well cannot be brought into existence by an act of will [20], it is unclear how the will could create internal reasons. And external reasons? If reasons are facts about what is good or harmful, say, then to create reasons at will would require creating facts about what is good or harmful by the exercise of will alone. That does seem to be her view of what commitment can do:

Commitments, as I understand them, are the volitional activity of taking something to be a reason by putting one’s very self behind the consideration. By putting our very self behind some consideration, we can endow that consideration with the normativity of a reason. A commitment is that in virtue of which that consideration is a will-based reason. [21]

Such “will-based”, self-defining normativity can nonetheless be *binding* precisely because, in “putting our very selves behind” the normative considerations we embrace, we also bind ourselves to them [22].

If commitment is an act of self-definition by means of “putting our very self behind” some consideration, then we have to ask whether *this* could be an act of will. For example, I can try to revive a failing relationship or philosophical project by trying to value it more, but that does not seem to be something my will by itself can achieve—perhaps in part because valuing involves *caring*, and I cannot will this sentiment into existence. What if I decide to *commit* to the relationship? That, too, I might try, but committing to a relationship or project involves more than a decision or fiat—I will not be “putting my very self behind” such a decision if I have no belief that I have some chance of carrying it out, or if I do not in fact have in me the

motivation to allocate real time and effort to it, as opposed to simply pronouncing myself in favor of it. Once again, however, we are led to elements—belief and motivation—that are not under the direct control of the will.² We are all familiar with cases in which we try, unsuccessfully, to “put our very selves behind” a course of action by deciding to commit to it. To “put one’s entire self” behind a choice thus involves *collaboration* between one’s will and one’s larger self, including one’s dispositions to believe and capacities to be concerned or motivated. An attempt to commit myself to the life of a lawyer, for example, might simply fail to put “my very self behind” this path because it does not really fit my fundamental beliefs, values, and motives; by contrast, an attempt to “put my very self behind” the life of a philosopher might succeed because it *does* fit. Whether one *can* “put one’s very self behind” a choice might be important to seeing whether it could be part of a good life for oneself, but this would require more than a decision to commit to it.

Perhaps, however, we should be looking at commitment somewhat differently, as creating a *normative* relation to a decision or goal or relationship rather than generating a constellation of beliefs and motives on its behalf? Kant might seem to be a natural ally for Chang, given his insistence that the will is a normative, not merely causal, power. Yet Chang argues that, since Kant thought that reason could discover the laws of the will, independent of the action of the will, this left no place for the kinds of “will-based” reasons Chang seeks to find [18-19]. As I understand Kant, however, he distinguished between the discovery of the objective laws of the will, which is the work of theoretical reason, and the subjective translation of these principles into laws of action via practical reason, which is the work of the will [Kant, 1797/1996, 6:218-219.]. For a law of the will to genuinely be a law *for a will*, it cannot be imposed by physical, metaphysical, or conceptual necessity—the agent must freely impose it upon themselves, an insight Kant attributed to Rousseau. So it seems to me that this picture of the role of the will in making laws for myself and binding myself to them should be congenial to Chang, though the commitment to laws would, on her account, be replaced by commitment to substantive normative considerations. After all, she speculates that that “the reasons that are generated by my commitments may seem even *more binding*” than reasons “given” to me by my situation [22].

On this view, even if commitment cannot on its own bring reasons for action into existence without some collaboration, it can put one in a normative relation to certain reasons—of taking responsibility for acting on these reasons. When I decide to commit to a relationship or project, I have set for myself a normative standard that would not otherwise exist, such that if I do not succeed in reviving the relationship or project this will not simply be a *causal outcome* of the circumstances and my attitudes, but a *failing* on my part as an agent. It is a sign of the normative that I can fail to “live up to” that which is normative for me—whereas there is no

² Compare here Gregory Kavka’s “Toxin Puzzle” [1983], showing that it is problematic whether one can *intend* at will. And intention likely to be part of commitment.

sense in which I (or anything or anyone) can fail to “live up to” physical, metaphysical, or conceptual laws.

It seems to me that Chang can make use of elements of this picture to explain what kind of “creation of reasons” is possible via commitment. The fact that one’s relation to a value, relationship, project, etc., is normative in this sense does not mean that it *ought* to be realized—perhaps I have made a foolish or immoral commitment. Rather, it means that I am not simply a passive observer in my life—that I have assumed some responsibility for the reasons I attempt to put into action (and the ones that I don’t), such that whether these reasons are realized (or not) this is not just something that happens to me, but to some extent *my doing*.

Cases where choices are “on a par” make it clear that we cannot look to “given” reasons to determine our actions, since in such cases “given” reasons point in neither direction overall. And when the choices involve matters of basic concern or life-defining decisions, it is also clear why simply flipping a coin in such situations seems inappropriate: we need to hold ourselves to certain reasons, explicitly or implicitly, to embody our appreciation of the reasons they are. Even as we recognize that there exist other reasons to which we might hold ourselves for other choices, we have taken the position that *these* are reasons we can be held responsible to, which makes ourselves capable of success, but also vulnerable to failure. This is, then, a *normative* power of agents: to bind themselves to a standard even though they cannot simply will into existence the causal powers needed to succeed. Perhaps we should even admit an “organic unity” such that a life in which one has successfully followed a consideration as a standard one has set for oneself contains an important value or meaning which a life that simply “follows” that consideration, but with no such normative agency on its behalf, does not? Thus, exercising this sort of normative power—“commitment” or “binding oneself” in this sense—might have a role to play in its own right in creating the value or meaning of a life.

Once we accept Chang’s notion of choices that are “on a par”, we can see that such choices are a very basic fact of life of our epistemic and practical lives, even if we do not usually see them. Consider the faculties of the mind, like perception and reasoning. The skeptics have made it clear that we cannot point to “given” reasons that establish the uniquely-favored rational status of having a disposition to rely upon our faculties in thought or action, even as a fallible default. Any reason for belief our minds could be “given” would itself depend upon the operation of these faculties, and so would be question-begging. So the decision we implicitly make (at least when we are not seriously disoriented or depressed) to rely upon our faculties rather than fall into Pyrrhonian skepticism, to take their testimony as a standard for belief, is therefore due in part to our active epistemic selves, not mere receptivity. We can’t by our will bring it about that the world *is* the way our perceptual or inferential faculties present it, but we can through continuing implicit or explicit exercise of epistemic agency set ourselves the standard of holding our beliefs to the testimony of our senses or inferences, thereby playing our part in believing for reasons if the world and our mind’s relation to it are anything like what we take them to be. In effect, we must actively go out beyond the reach of “given” reasons for

belief in order to make ourselves capable of believing for normative reasons (or, ultimately, participating in a community of inquirers), and to have a chance of exercising our epistemic agency successfully.,

In the practical sphere, the skeptic argues that we cannot provide non-question-begging grounds for claiming that there are things or creatures of value. To defend the existence of any such value we'd have to attribute some authority to our mental faculties and evaluative attitudes, and that, too, would be question-begging. Still, by committing ourselves (usually implicitly, always fallibly) to the existence of things or creatures of value, and holding ourselves responsible for what we do in the light of those values, we can put ourselves in a position to be creatures who act for normative reasons—and, if the world and value are anything like what we take them to be, we will have a chance of doing so successfully. Might this be an example of something like what Chang has in mind in saying that the will can make certain considerations normative for us by actively going beyond “given” reasons when a choice is “on a par”?

This would partially vindicate Chang's idea of the third dogma of normativity, though I am not sure it goes far enough, or even whether it is an argumentative path down which she thinks it profitable to go. At any rate, it is a path that has given me a sense of the importance of her work in drawing our attention to something we need to see, but which in our dogmatic slumbers, we seldom if ever do. Whether we are creatures who believe or act for reasons is not simply determined “by our nature” or our “responses to reasons”—it is something we must make happen through continuing implicit or explicit commitment to holding ourselves responsible to the reasons we embrace.

It also suggests that the third dogma might need a bit of rephrasing for the sake of clarity. According to this dogma, “*the ground of a reason or value is never under our direct volitional control*”. The rephrasing needed might be clearest in the case of reasons for belief. In believing, we commit (usually implicitly) to fallible normative reliance on our mental faculties, and this puts us in a position to receive reasons for belief through the senses or reasoning. However,, this “grounding” of reasons for belief it is not itself *evidence* in favor of what we come to believe—not “one more reason to believe” to be weighed as such. Instead, it may be a *condition* for having and responding to reasons for belief. But it is a condition we contribute through epistemic agency. We conceded to the skeptic that we could not have such evidence, and our commitment cannot now manufacture it—we cannot directly, volitionally create evidence where there was none. And similarly for values.

If so, then there is a fourth dogma of normativity Chang's work can help bring to light: the view that whatever can appropriately determine the mind in belief or action must always be a *reason* for the belief or action chosen. If the mind must wait for such reasons to be “given” to it, it would never progress beyond all-purpose agnosticism. Instead, the mind must actively set out to “take” potential reasons from the stream of experience and thoughts, and give them shape and a guiding role in its mental life, thereby also taking some responsibility for its part in making experience and thoughts into reasons for belief and action. Chang is here in good company. A contemporary Bayesian or designer of artificial intelligence would put this in terms of reliance upon *priors* as a condition for learning. And a contemporary neuroscientist would emphasize

that vision is not a passive “recording” of stimuli, but an active process of giving shape to, and making selective use of, what impinges upon us.

Chang seems to me right about the need to go beyond a passive view of rationality in belief and action, to take seriously the possibility that value or reasons are ultimately fragmented, to look to the will as a source of bindingness, and to see commitment, even in the absence of “given” reasons, as a defining act of rational beings. And we have her own commitment in the face of dogmas—and dogmatists—to thank making all this hard to ignore, and thus for so fully taking responsibility, not only in forming beliefs and acting, but for her role as a practical and epistemic agent in community with others.³

References

Kant, Immanuel. 1797/1996. *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. M. Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kavka, Gregory S. 1983. “The Toxin Puzzle”. *Analysis* 43, no. 1 (Jan. 1983): 33-36.

Nagel, Thomas. 1986. *The View from Nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Parfit, Derek. 2011. *On What Matters*. Vol. II. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³ The author would like to express his gratitude to Ruth Chang for many helpful conversations, from which she surely wishes I had learned more, and to thank the editor, Elizabeth Blake, for careful reading and helpful suggestions.