

Believing at Will

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Although it is widely held that we cannot form beliefs at will, and that this reflects a metaphysical not just a psychological disability, it has not been easy to explain why this should be. The most well-known argument, due to Bernard Williams, has been decisively criticized. Aside from some remarks about perceptual belief, whose application is obviously local, his reasons appear in the following passage:¹

[It] is not a contingent fact that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I believe something, as it is a contingent fact that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I'm blushing. Why is this? One reason is connected with the characteristic of beliefs that they aim at truth. [. . .] With regard to no belief could I know—or, if all this is to be done in full consciousness, even suspect—that I had acquired it at will. But if I can acquire beliefs at will, I must know that I am able to do this; and could I know that I was capable of this feat, if with regard to every feat of this kind which I had performed I necessarily had to believe that it had not taken place? (Williams 1970, 148)

Williams's argument has two premises. First, that if I am able to acquire beliefs at will, I must know that I am able to do so; this is presumably meant to follow from some general requirement on intentional action. Second, that I cannot at once

1. On perceptual belief, see Williams (1970, 148–49); his discussion is criticized in Bennett (1990, 94–95).

believe that p and know that I have come to believe this at will. It is supposed to be a consequence of the second premise that the condition in the first cannot be met.

There are standard objections. First, even if we grant the restriction on beliefs known to have been acquired at will, it seems to leave room for knowledge of the relevant ability either on general grounds or through knowledge, of beliefs I *used* to have, that they were acquired at will (Winters 1979, 254–55). What the principle rules out is the case in which I know that I have formed a particular belief at will while continuing to hold that belief, as when I have just completed the act of forming it. But then it ought to be enough to save the possibility of believing at will that each instance of doing so is accompanied by local amnesia, in which I forget how my belief was formed (Bennett 1990, 93). These objections grant the premises of Williams’s argument, but deny its validity. A further objection is that the second premise is false. One could know that one’s belief was acquired at will but persist in having it, and do so rationally, if one takes it now to be supported by sufficient evidence (Winters 1979, 253). A limiting case of this phenomenon occurs with beliefs that one believes to be self-fulfilling (Velleman 1989, 127–29).

In this article, I explore the remains of Williams’s argument, examine one replacement, and propose a limited repair. The replacement argument appears in Pamela Hieronymi’s recent essay, “Controlling Attitudes” (2006). It is distinctive in that it is not just a revision or modification of Williams’s approach and because of its aspiration to generality. Its strategy is meant to work for intention, too, and indeed for any “commitment-constituted attitude,” showing that you cannot intend, resent, or forgive at will (Hieronymi 2006, 74, n. 49). In objecting to her argument about belief, we begin to clarify what would count as “believing at will.” That project is further pursued in section II, which distinguishes two grades of voluntary belief: forming a belief intentionally and forming it intentionally “irrespective of its truth” (Williams 1970, 148). Hieronymi’s argument is meant to exclude the former possibility. Williams’s argument is more modest, being directed against the latter. Section III presents an argument, inspired by Williams, for a qualified version of the modest impossibility claim. His principal mistake was to confuse the kind of knowledge involved in acting intentionally with knowledge of the ability to act. When we correct for this, the standard objections lapse. Section IV takes up a question prompted by the modesty of Williams’s conclusion, and mine: Should we make a virtue of possibility and go on to identify the intentional forming of belief, not “irrespective of its truth,” with the exercise of judgment? Against Descartes, on one interpretation, and against some recent work on truth as the aim of belief, I urge that we should not.

I

After rehearsing one of the standard lines against Williams—the claim that one could systematically forget the origin of one’s intentionally formed beliefs (see Hieronymi 2006, 46–47, following Bennett 1990, 93)—Pamela Hieronymi argues, in “Controlling Attitudes,” that we cannot believe or intend at will. In the case of belief, her explanation rests on four premises:

1. Belief is answerable to the truth of the proposition believed.
2. Believing at will would have to involve a mediating intention, by whose execution the belief is formed.
3. This intention would not be answerable to the truth of the relevant belief.
4. Intention is answerable to the same considerations as its object.

“Answerability” is a matter of subjection to standards of justification or warrant: belief is answerable to the truth in that, by nature, its justification rests on meeting standards of consistency and evidential support that have to do with truth (Hieronymi 2006, 49–50). By contrast, if one could believe at will, one could execute an intention to believe that *p* that would be answerable not to the truth, but to standards of practical justification, turning on such things as the benefits and costs, or moral virtues, of having that belief. In the ordinary case, however, “both the intention [to act] and the action are answerable to the same set of reasons” (Hieronymi 2006, 61): the justification for intending to ϕ and the justification for doing it go hand in hand. It follows that the intention to believe that *p* both is and is not answerable to the truth of the corresponding proposition. It is a paradoxical intention. While there may be room to induce the belief that *p* within oneself by managerial activity—hypnosis, conditioning, searching for plausible evidence that will seem to support the desired belief—one cannot form the belief that *p* by executing the intention to believe.

A peculiar feature of this argument is that its explicit topic is the intention to believe that *p*, not the intention to *form* that belief. This way of framing things ignores a metaphysical contrast that is essential to action theory, between *states*, like being tall, and things that can be finished or completed and in that sense *done*. This distinction corresponds to the grammatical notion of perfective aspect. States cannot be, so to speak, perfectly instantiated; they cannot be done.² To say that someone was tall, or believed that *p*, is not to say that they completed a performance of being tall, or believing that *p*, as one might complete a performance of walking and thus have walked. It is merely to describe their prior and perhaps enduring condition. By contrast, to say that someone digested their food, or grew to be tall is to describe a completed happening of digestion or growth. The distinction is exhaustive: what can be instantiated by an object can be instantiated perfectly, like walking, digesting, and growing; or it is a state, like believing, desiring, and being tall. The fact that believing is a state gives Hieronymi’s argument a specious plausibility. For the basic object of intention is never a state, but always something that can be done, the sort of thing of which we can ask why someone did it and evaluate his reasons. Although it makes sense to say, for instance, that I intend to be a philosopher when I grow up, this can be true only if I intend to do something that I think will make me a philosopher—to become one,

2. Here I draw on Michael Thompson’s (forthcoming) “Naïve Action Theory”; cf. Comrie (1976, 48–51). Why not give equal attention to the progressive? States cannot be perfectly *or* progressively instantiated: One cannot be in the process of believing that *p* as one can be in the process of walking home. This is true, but it may not be specific to states: think of apparently instantaneous actions like starting and stopping, for which the progressive has no ordinary use, but which can nevertheless be done.

or to work in a philosophy department, or to do philosophy, or to bring one of these things about. Intending is the kind of state that motivates one to do what can be done and guides it to completion.³ Since believing cannot be done, in the perfective sense, it cannot be the basic object of intention. One cannot simply intend to believe that *p*. Rather, when A intends to believe that *p*, he intends to *form* the belief that *p* or to *bring about* his own possession of that belief. In the latter case, he would not count as believing at will, even if he acted on his intention. He would simply manage himself in a way that is calculated to produce the belief, which is evidently possible. Believing at will in the disputed sense requires one to form the belief that *p* intentionally; the forming of belief must itself be an instance of intentional action.

What happens when Hieronymi's argument is adapted to this point? We have to replace premise (1) with this:

- 1*. The forming of belief is answerable to the truth of the belief that is being formed.

And now it is a striking feature of the argument that, if it works, it shows not only that one cannot form a belief at will, but that one cannot so much as *intend* to do so. It follows from the modified premises that the intention to form the belief that *p* would be answerable to the truth of that belief, and that it would not. Nothing could satisfy these conflicting conditions; so there can be no such intention. The strength of this conclusion is disturbing. Even if it is impossible to form a belief intentionally, someone might *intend* to form a given belief, if only in ignorance. This point is especially clear when we think of future plans, as when I intend to form the belief that *p* next month and have yet to reflect on how. The problem, if there is one, lies in *acting* on this intention, not in having the intention to begin with. Hieronymi's argument proves too much. Something has gone wrong.

There are two ways to diagnose the error, short of engaging with the more general framework of answerability and the normative conceptions of intention and belief on which the argument rests.⁴ First, we might object to premise 3. Even if the intention to form the belief that *p* is answerable to practical reasons, why can't those reasons coincide in the particular case with being answerable to the truth of that belief? Why not conclude that beliefs *can* be formed intentionally, but that the practical reasons for doing so are always truth-related? That issue will be taken up below, in section IV. More radically, we might object to the assumption, tacitly made throughout, that the object of intention—in this case, forming a belief—can only be subject to one sort of justification. Why not say instead that, in forming a belief intentionally, one is subject to both epistemic and practical

3. See *Reasons without Rationalism* (Setiya 2007, 31–32); the sense of guidance may differ for basic and nonbasic action, but in this context the details can be ignored.

4. According to Hieronymi (2006, 50), intention and belief are “commitment-constituted”: “to believe that *p* is to be committed to *p* as true—to take *p* to be true in a way that leaves one answerable to certain questions and criticisms.” Against the claim of constitution, one would think that I am answerable to those questions precisely *because* I believe that *p*, a state of mind that explains, and therefore cannot be identified with, my normative vulnerability. Similar doubts apply to the normative constitution of intending and other attitudes.

assessment? One's action is answerable to reasons of both kinds, both practically and epistemically answerable, and there is at least provisional room for a belief to be formed in a way that is epistemically justified but practically irrational, or the reverse. Unless we can explain why it cannot be subject to plural standards of justification, we cannot rule out the intentional forming of belief. What follows instead is that the intention to form that belief is itself to be assessed in both epistemic and practical terms or, more plausibly, that the equation of premise 4—that intention is answerable to the same considerations as its object—holds only for the latter. One's decision to ϕ is practically justified if and only if one would be practically justified in doing ϕ .⁵ But one's decision may be justified in that sense even if it is a decision to do something badly "in its own terms": to fall short of the standards of excellence that apply to doing ϕ , as the particular kind of action it is. I may deliberately lose to my child at noughts and crosses by playing ineptly, or decide to sabotage the theft by leaving my fingerprints on the safe. In each case, I am practically justified in doing a bad job. So far, there is nothing to stop us from conceiving of intentional belief-formation in just the same way, as a kind of action one can perform badly in its own terms, and deliberately so—that is, without regard for standards of epistemic justification—but for good practical reasons.

The upshot is that Hieronymi's argument fails to demonstrate the impossibility of believing at will, even of forming a belief intentionally "irrespective of its truth." The failure is instructive in forcing us to distinguish the state of believing from the process of forming a belief. What purports to be intentional in believing at will is belief-formation. Believing is not itself a possible action because it cannot be done, in the perfective sense; but this is irrelevant to the claim of impossibility with which we are concerned. We are left with no clear picture of the content of that claim, or of satisfactory grounds on which it might be held.

II

Begin with the need for clarification: What is it that we mean to rule out when we deny that it is possible to form a belief at will? Presumably not the possibility of wishful thinking, which in its simplest form consists in the motivation of belief by anxious desire.⁶ This is perfectly commonplace, if regrettable, a kind of belief-formation that is epistemically irrational, functioning to dispel anxiety or to bring satisfaction, and in which we do not knowingly engage. Believing at will may depend upon our capacity for wishful thought, but it takes the more specific form of intentional action: To believe at will is, at the very least, to form a belief intentionally.

A further condition is often imposed on believing at will, that it must involve the forming of belief in *basic* intentional action, not by taking further means. This is what Jonathan Bennett (1990, 88–90) has in mind when he insists on the

5. Even this is controversial. It might be denied by those who accept the possibility of "intending at will," so that the reasons for intending to ϕ and the reasons for doing it come apart, as perhaps in Kavka's (1983) "The Toxin Puzzle." Hieronymi (2006, 63–64) rejects this possibility, but her argument against it depends on the assumption presently in dispute.

6. See Johnston (1988, 67–74).

“motivational immediacy” of voluntary belief. As Hieronymi (2006, 48–49) points out, however, the proposed restriction is puzzling. Nonbasic actions like building a house are no less intentional or voluntary than such putative basic actions as clenching one’s fist. Why should we limit our attention to the latter?

What prompts the condition is a desire to leave room for the deliberate production of beliefs by what I earlier called “managerial activity”: hypnosis, conditioning, searching for plausible evidence that will seem to support the desired belief. Like wishful thinking, these activities are commonplace; unlike it, they are also intentional. Even so, they do not amount to believing at will. Those who insist that a belief formed at will must be formed without taking further means do so in order to set these possibilities aside; for in basic action, the relation between intention and performance seems “direct” in a way that it is not in the self-management of belief. There is, however, no need to make this restriction in order to explain why managing oneself or one’s situation so as to produce a belief is not a form of believing at will. It is a necessary truth about nonbasic action that if one does *A* by doing *B*, doing *B* is a *constitutive* not *productive* means to doing *A*: It is an *instance* of doing *A* or a *part of the process* of doing *A*, not just a prior cause that makes it happen.⁷ That is why, although I can cause myself to blush by dropping my trousers in public, I do not count as blushing intentionally, not even as a nonbasic action, when I do so. Dropping my trousers is not an instance of blushing, nor is it part of that process; it is merely something that prompts it to occur. Likewise, hypnosis may be a means of producing a belief, but is not itself an instance or a part of belief-formation, even when I do it to myself. The same is true of conditioning and of the search for plausible evidence. No matter how efficiently I take such means, my belief is merely a *product* of intentional action; I do not form the belief intentionally, and so I do not count as believing at will. It follows from the principle above that to form a belief intentionally one must do so as a basic intentional action or by taking constitutive means, such as wishful thinking or inference (which are instances of belief-formation) or becoming more confident (which is part of it). We do not have to restrict our attention to basic action in order to explain why self-manipulation does not count.

It is tempting to stop here, with a simple equation: Believing at will is forming a belief intentionally, not just by taking productive means. That is a perfectly legitimate way to use the words and a minimal condition on what falls under them. Thus, if it is impossible to form a belief intentionally, as a completely general matter, it is impossible to believe at will. That is what the most ambitious arguments, like Hieronymi’s, purport to show. Intentional belief-formation is, we might say, the first grade of voluntary belief. There is room for doubt, however, that the target of our puzzlement is so generous. When Williams denies that it is possible to believe at will, his discussion is qualified. Consider the following remarks, dropped from the presentation of his central argument above:

7. Throughout this paragraph, I rely on judgments about when doing *A* is an instance or a part of doing *B*, and when it is not. A proper treatment of the contrast between constitutive and productive means would have to say more about the basis of such claims. In doing so, it would pass from the topic of intentional action, in particular, to the nature and unity of events, as such.

If I could acquire a belief at will, I could acquire it whether it was true or not; moreover I would know that I could acquire it whether it was true or not. If in full consciousness I could acquire a “belief” irrespective of its truth, it is unclear that before the event I could seriously think of it as a belief, i.e., as something purporting to represent reality. At the very least, there must be a restriction on what is the case after the event; since I could not then, in full consciousness, regard this as a belief of mine, i.e., something I take to be true, and also know that I acquired it at will. (Williams 1970, 148)

One can interpret the opening conditional as a mistaken inference, from the fact that believing at will is forming a belief intentionally to the conclusion that we can do so without regard for its truth.⁸ That ignores the possibility of views that allow for intentional belief-formation so long as it is epistemically constrained, as when it is performed on the basis of grounds one takes to be sufficient evidence. (See the discussion in section IV.) Alternatively, and more plausibly, one can read the conditional as a stipulation about what is to count as “believing at will”: not just intentional belief-formation, but forming a belief intentionally “irrespective of its truth.” That is the second grade of voluntary belief.

To simplify terms, I will distinguish forming a belief intentionally (the first grade) from believing at will (the second) and define the latter more carefully as follows:

To believe at will is to form the belief that *p* by intentional action, believing throughout that, if one were to form that belief or to become more confident that *p* intentionally, one’s degree of confidence or belief would not be epistemically justified.

Here the idea of forming a belief intentionally “irrespective of its truth” is generalized from outright belief to degrees of confidence and understood to require the belief that one’s attitude to the proposition of that *p* would not be epistemically justified if it were intentionally formed. The question is local: In the circumstance at hand, would a belief or greater confidence in that particular proposition, formed in that way, be epistemically justified? My answer may be “yes” for one proposition in one circumstance, but “no” for another.

We can see the force of the requirement by examining what it fails to count as believing at will. There are three possibilities.⁹ Someone might believe that he already has sufficient evidence on which to form the belief that *p* and that his belief would be justified, at least so long as it is formed in the right way. Those who conceive of judgment as forming a belief intentionally under the guise of evidence will think of this as the typical case. Alternatively, one might believe that the belief that *p* would be justified if one were to form it intentionally, because new evidence

8. For something like this move, see Alston (1988, 261).

9. For the sake of simplicity, I describe these possibilities in terms of belief alone; exactly parallel remarks would apply to the process of becoming more confident that *p*.

would then exist. This evidence might be supplied by the belief itself, as when I believe that confidence in my own success would make success more probable, or by the intention to form the belief that p , if I am somehow convinced of a correlation between having that intention and the fact that p . In none of these cases is a belief formed “irrespective of its truth” since the subject expects his belief to be supported by sufficient evidence, and so to be epistemically justified. Finally, the definition does not count as believing at will someone who neither accepts nor denies that his belief that p would be justified if it were intentionally formed. This omission is harder to motivate. Should we say of the agnostic or uncertain agent that in forming a belief intentionally he forms it “irrespective of its truth”? Not in forming it against what he thinks the evidence will support, though he does not form it in accord with such a belief. His action occupies an intermediate grade, stronger than intentional belief-formation, but weaker than believing at will, as it was defined above. In what follows, I set this possibility aside, not because it is insignificant, but because it would complicate an already qualified argument in ways that I am unable to address.

III

Despite the objections, Williams’s argument hints at an obstacle that stands in the way of any attempt to believe at will. He states the obstacle, mistakenly, as the claim that one cannot know, of any belief, that it was acquired at will. The standard reply is that one can do so perfectly well if one takes that belief now to be supported by sufficient evidence; it does not matter what one thinks about its origins.¹⁰ What this reply concedes is that there is an epistemic constraint on belief, of roughly this shape:

It is impossible to believe that p or to be confident that p while believing that this degree of confidence or belief is not epistemically justified.¹¹

Unfortunately, I do not know how to explain exactly why this condition holds, or how to prove that it does. One argument for the epistemic constraint is that, without it, we cannot account for the impossibility of believing at will; a fragment of that argument appears in this article. In any case, the basic thought is that part of what it is to believe that p —part of what distinguishes believing from other attitudes that might inform behavior, like assuming something, taking it for granted, or accepting it in a context—is the disposition to defend one’s attitude in epistemic terms, as for instance by appeal to evidence that p . Properly characterized, this disposition is inconsistent with believing that one’s attitude is not epistemically justified, which is therefore inconsistent with the belief that p . Apparent violations of this principle are better understood as cases in which one has a nagging thought or a tendency to act as if p , even though one does not believe it.

10. See Winters (1979, 253) and Velleman (1989, 127–29).

11. See Hampshire (1975, 79, 86–87), and compare Winters (1979, 246–47).

This comes out when we ask someone, “Why do you think that?” If I deny that I am epistemically justified in believing that *p*, the proper response is to say “I don’t really believe that *p*, I just can’t get that possibility out of my head” or “I can’t help lapsing back into my old ways.” Similar points apply to being confident that *p*, where this confidence falls short of belief, though the details here are even harder to sort out.

Whatever its precise explanation, the epistemic constraint on confidence and belief restricts the scope of believing at will. If I know that I have formed the belief that *p* at will, it follows by the definition in section II that I believe that my belief would be unjustified if it were formed in that way. Only a failure of attention or logical confusion could save me from realizing that my belief that *p* is therefore not epistemically justified, and so permit me to have that belief in light of the epistemic constraint. Such failures and confusions are no doubt possible, and to that extent so is believing at will—though Williams seems right to insist that, if one manages it in this way, one does not do so “in full consciousness.” That phrase is a useful shorthand for the kind of attention and logical clarity that ensure the trivial inference from “My belief that *p* was formed intentionally” and “My belief that *p* would not be justified if it were formed intentionally” to the conclusion that my belief is not epistemically justified.

The remaining question is whether one could form a belief at will *without* failure of attention or logical confusion, because one does so without knowing that one’s belief has been intentionally formed. Think of Jonathan Bennett’s “Credamites”:

Credam is a community each of whose members can be immediately induced to acquire beliefs. It doesn’t happen often, because they don’t often think: “I don’t believe that *P*, but it would be good if I did.” Still, such thoughts come to them occasionally, and on some of those occasions the person succumbs to temptation and wills himself to have the desired belief. [. . .] When a Credamite gets a belief in this way, he forgets that this is how he came by it. (Bennett 1990, 93)

So long as the forgetting is sufficiently prompt that the origins of the belief are forgotten by the time it is formed, the Credamites will never find themselves in the predicament just described. When they form a belief at will, they will be in no position to infer that this belief is not epistemically justified. This possibility goes deeper than the other objections to Williams’s argument: it identifies a condition that must be met by any instance of believing at will that takes place “in full consciousness.” As the previous paragraph showed, in order to believe at will without failure of attention or logical confusion, one must be unaware that one’s belief has been intentionally formed.

What explains the impossibility of forming a belief at will “in full consciousness” is that this demand for ignorance cannot be met; it runs up against the nature of intentional action. This is not because one cannot ϕ intentionally without knowing that one is *able* to ϕ , as Williams claimed. What we need instead is a more direct connection between knowledge and intentional action, something closer to

Anscombe's (1963) idea of "practical knowledge."¹² In the ordinary case, what I do intentionally, I do knowingly; I can identify what I am doing as one of my intentional actions. Thus, if I have no idea that I am shaking my head as I listen to a visiting speaker, or I fail to recognize this as an expression of my will rather than a reflex or involuntary movement, I am not doing so intentionally.

The implication here is qualified, not only because the beliefs involved will sometimes fail to count as knowledge, as for instance when knowledge of ability is absent, but because there are cases in which an agent acts intentionally in doing ϕ not only without knowledge of what he is doing, but without the belief that he is doing it. As Donald Davidson observed, "[a] man may be making ten carbon copies as he writes, and this may be intentional; yet he may not know that he is; all he knows is that he is trying" (Davidson 1971, 50; see also Davidson 1978, 91–94). The carbon-copier need not even *believe* that he is making ten copies, since he doubts that the pressure will go through so many times. As I have argued elsewhere, however, the challenge posed by such examples is limited (Setiya 2007, 24–25). Although the carbon-copier does not believe that he is making ten copies, he is doing so by performing other intentional actions of which he *is* aware. For instance, he believes that he is pressing on the article as hard as he can, and that this is the means by which he hopes to make the copies, even if he is not sure that he will succeed. We can incorporate this amendment as follows:

If A is doing ϕ intentionally, he believes that he is doing so, or else he is doing ϕ by performing some other intentional action, in which he does believe.¹³

Consider, in light of this principle, a specific attempt to form a belief at will, as when a more optimistic Alice undertakes the White Queen's challenge to believe that she is "just one hundred and one [years], five months and a day."¹⁴ According to our earlier definition of believing at will, Alice must form the belief that the White Queen is a hundred and one by intentional action, believing throughout that if she were to form that belief or to become more confident of it intentionally, her confidence or belief would not be epistemically justified. Now, in the sense that matters to us, forming the belief that p just is becoming sufficiently confident that p .¹⁵ Barring logical confusion, one cannot believe that one is forming the belief that p , in this sense, without believing that one is becoming more

12. See also Hampshire (1959, 95, 102).

13. On the explanation of this requirement, see pt. 1 of *Reasons without Rationalism* (Setiya 2007). In "Practical Knowledge" (Setiya, forthcoming), I discuss the epistemology of knowledge in intentional action, and consider how the principle in the text might be further qualified so as to deal with partial belief. It would introduce too many complications to address these issues here.

14. The example is taken from Carroll (1896, 183–84), where Alice denies that she is able to form the relevant belief:

"Can't you?" the Queen said in a pitying tone. "Try again: draw a long breath and shut your eyes." Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said "one *can't* believe impossible things."

15. See Bennett (1990, 90–92). Our topic is credence or degree of belief, not acceptance in a context or for the sake of practical reasoning. For this distinction, see Bratman (1992).

confident that *p*; one cannot want to form the belief that *p* without wanting to become more confident that *p*; and one cannot form the belief that *p* intentionally without intentionally becoming more confident that *p*. It follows that, in forming her belief, and barring logical confusion, Alice is intentionally becoming more confident that the White Queen is a hundred and one. She must be doing so as a basic intentional action or by taking constitutive means, which she thinks of as ways of becoming more confident. Given the principle of practical knowledge, above, she must believe, in doing so, that she is becoming more confident that the White Queen is a hundred and one, by intentional action. It follows in turn, again barring logical confusion, that Alice believes that she *has* become more confident of this intentionally. For “becoming more confident that *p*” is, in linguistic terms, an *atelic* progressive, like “walking” or “singing”; its application logically implies the application of the corresponding perfective.¹⁶ If A is walking, he has walked. If he is singing, he sang. And if he is becoming more confident that *p*, he has become more confident. Barring logical confusion, Alice therefore finds herself in the quandary with which this section began. She believes that she has intentionally become more confident that the White Queen is a hundred and one, and that if it were gained intentionally, her confidence would not be epistemically justified. How can she help but see, then, that her confidence is not justified, and so violate the epistemic constraint on confidence and belief? Only through inattention or logical confusion can Alice become more confident that the White Queen is a hundred and one, and thus succeed in forming that belief at will.

The principles behind this argument are completely general: the definition of believing at will, the epistemic constraint on confidence and belief, and the qualified thesis of practical knowledge:

To believe at will is to form the belief that *p* by intentional action, believing throughout that, if one were to form that belief or to become more confident that *p* intentionally, one’s degree of confidence or belief would not be epistemically justified.

It is impossible to believe that *p* or to be confident that *p* while believing that this degree of confidence or belief is not epistemically justified.

If A is doing ϕ intentionally, he believes that he is doing so, or else he is doing ϕ by performing some other intentional action, in which he does believe.

Since forming the belief that *p* just is becoming sufficiently confident that *p*, where “becoming more confident” is an *atelic* progressive, the requirement of practical knowledge in forming a belief intentionally cannot be met, without logical confusion, unless one believes that one has intentionally become more confident that *p*. The epistemic constraint implies that one cannot do this, without failure of atten-

16. A classic discussion is Comrie (1976, 44–45); for a more recent philosophical treatment, see Szabó (2004, 44–50, esp. at 47). The contrast is with *telic* progressives like “walking home” and “singing the Marseillaise,” which can apply at a time even though the corresponding perfective does not and never will obtain.

tion or logical confusion, if one satisfies the definition of believing at will; for one is in a position to infer, quite trivially, that one's degree of confidence that p is epistemically unjustified. It follows that one cannot believe at will "in full consciousness": One must at some point fail to attend to one's beliefs or fail to accept their logical consequences.

The argument of the last two paragraphs assumes that, if someone forms the belief that p intentionally, they are at some point intentionally *forming* that belief. It turns on the application of the progressive. One might object that this ignores the possibility of instantaneous belief-formation, an intentional change of state that has no duration at all, so that it is never true to say that its subject is forming the relevant belief.¹⁷ But the argument still applies. The only way to make sense of practical knowledge for such nondurative action is to assume that, upon doing it, the agent knows what he has done. Or, more carefully: he believes that he has ϕ -ed, or else he did so by performing some other intentional action, in whose performance he does believe. It remains true that, in forming the belief that p intentionally, without logical confusion, one must believe that one has intentionally become more confident that p . And in a case of believing at will, this will be in tension with the epistemic constraint on confidence and belief.¹⁸

Although Williams was wrong to state this constraint as he did, and to focus on knowledge of ability rather than practical knowledge, his conclusion was basically right. The impossibility of believing at will "in full consciousness" rests on the fact that doing something intentionally is doing it knowingly, at least in the qualified sense that one must believe that one is doing it as an intentional action or that one is taking further means. This is what prevents the Credamites from forgetting what they have done, given the kind of action belief-formation would have to be: either nondurative or a process of becoming more confident. Believing at will without failure of attention or logical confusion would require a lapse of self-knowledge, an ignorance of what one is doing intentionally that conflicts with its being intentional. That is the sense in which, and the extent to which, it is impossible to believe at will.

IV

This modest result says nothing about the possibility of forming a belief intentionally when one does not believe that, if one were to form it in that way, one's belief would be epistemically unjustified. It thus says nothing against the conception of judgment as intentional action. On this conception, to judge that p is, *inter alia*, to form the belief that p intentionally for reasons that one takes as evidence that p .

17. See Comrie (1976, 41–44) on the idea of a "punctual situation."

18. It would simplify the argument of this section if we could assume, in general, that upon doing ϕ intentionally, one believes that one has done it, or else one did it by doing other things in whose performance one does believe. The present remarks would then apply to any case of intentional belief-formation. But is that assumption true? Might there be a case of basic intentional action in which one is unable to keep track of one's progress and thus unable to know when one is done—like closing one's hand behind one's back while under anesthetic?

Understood in this way, judgment is distinct from mere “change in view,” which can happen without intentional involvement, from ordinary intentional actions of investigation and inquiry—looking and listening, asking someone else, performing an experiment, examining arguments—and from the state or condition of believing that *p* on the ground that *q*. It is supposed to be a matter of doing something, *forming* a belief, as an intentional action. One attraction of this picture, however the details are worked out, is that it offers to supply a sense in which we can be active rather than passive in our beliefs. It also promises a partial account of self-knowledge: We know what we are coming to believe in making a judgment in just the way that we know what we are doing in doing it intentionally. The epistemology of “practical knowledge” may have puzzles of its own, being “knowledge without observation” (Anscombe 1963, 13–15) and perhaps without inference (Hampshire 1959: 70).¹⁹ But if judgment is intentional belief-formation, solving these puzzles will account for more than knowledge of one’s overt behavior; it will begin to explain what is distinctive about self-knowledge of belief.

Despite all this, I doubt that judgment is well conceived as intentional action—though not because there is some further incoherence left unfathomed by the argument of section III. Instead, the problems turn on asking *how* the act of judgment is intentionally performed. Is the assessment of evidence on which a judgment is based explicit or not? There are difficulties either way.

Suppose, first, that the act of judgment is based on an explicitly positive assessment of the evidence that *p*. Presumably, this belief about the weight of evidence need not itself be the product of judgment, or we would face a vicious regress. This concession is awkward: Sophisticated epistemic thoughts arise from consideration of evidence without our intentional involvement, which then issues in the plain belief that *p*. Surely judgment is no less involved in the former than the latter. But even if we set the awkwardness aside, there is the fact that a sufficiently strong assessment of the evidence that *p* entails belief and therefore leaves no room for a further act of judgment. If I think that the evidence proves that *p*, I therein believe that *p*; there is nothing more for me to do.²⁰ What is needed here is a belief about the evidence that does not entail belief in what the evidence supports, as perhaps the belief that it is conclusive without amounting to proof, or that it is merely sufficient. In the first case, I take the evidence to require the belief that *p*; in the second, I take it to permit that belief. Again, there are difficulties either way. It is only in pathological cases, ones of epistemic *akrasia*, that surveying some evidence that we take to require the belief that *p* leaves us unconvinced—without the relevant belief.²¹ There is, ordinarily, no temporal gap between recognizing the conclusive force of evidence and believing the conclusion. No act of judgment

19. For further discussion, see “Practical Knowledge” (Setiya, forthcoming).

20. Something similar may hold for thoughts about epistemic likelihood in relation to confidence or degree of belief. For a conception of epistemic modals congenial to this, see Yalcin (2007, forthcoming).

21. If epistemic *akrasia* is strictly impossible, the argument of this paragraph could be simplified accordingly. See, for instance, Hurley (1989, 130–35). Note, however, that Hurley’s argument is directed against the possibility of believing against what one regards as the balance of evidence *for a reason*, not against the possibility of doing so *simpliciter*.

remains to be performed. What is more, when we do find ourselves in this predicament, afflicted by epistemic *akrasia*, we do not have the power to form the recalcitrant belief simply by intentional action. As a matter of psychological fact, our failures of reason are not so tractable; they cannot be resolved at will. What about the other possibility, in which we are so far unconvinced by evidence we take to permit but not require the belief that *p*? Here it would be an epistemic error to form the belief that *p* intentionally, even if one could. To do so is to let one's intention to form the belief that *p* tip the epistemic balance, even when it is quite irrelevant to the truth of that belief.²² Conceived as intentional action, the exercise of judgment in cases of mere permission would be epistemically irrational.

What follows from these remarks? Only that we need a different account of the way in which judgment is epistemically constrained, one in which it is performed directly on the basis of considerations that constitute the relevant putative evidence, not through a prior belief about what the evidence weighs. We need an account of what it is to treat such considerations as evidence, tacitly or implicitly, when one intentionally forms a belief. In the most elaborate recent defense of judgment as intentional action, by Nishi Shah and David Velleman (2005), this account is meant to be derived from the doctrine that belief "aims at truth." The story builds on an earlier article by Shah (2003), "How Truth Governs Belief," at the heart of which we find the following argument:

In forming a belief intentionally, one conceives what one intends to form as a belief. This is to conceive it as a cognitive attitude that is correct if and only if its object is a true proposition. In acknowledging this standard of correctness, one accepts the prescription to believe that *p* if and only if it is true that *p* as governing one's belief-formation. It follows that, in forming the belief that *p* intentionally, one activates a disposition to be moved by, and only by, considerations one regards as relevant to the truth of that proposition.²³

Like Hieronymi, Shah and Velleman rely on a normative conception of belief. They take it as analytic that the belief that *p* is correct if and only if it is true that *p*. This is something one understands in applying the concept of belief. What is more, the judgment of correctness for belief conforms to a strict motivational internalism. In conceiving what one intends to form as a belief, one accepts the prescription to form it if and only if its object is true; one intends to form a true belief. This might be queried. After all, in cases of clear-eyed *akrasia*, we seem to judge that it would

22. See White (2005, 447–49). One can accept this point while resisting White's consequent argument against the possibility of mere epistemic permission. As with the previous note, ruling out this possibility would only simplify the argument in the text.

23. This is not a direct quotation but an attempt to paraphrase the line of reasoning in Shah (2003, 467–70). A similar argument appears in Shah and Velleman (2005, 501, 505, 519), but with a further step, through the activity of "affirmation" (Shah and Velleman 2005, 503–5), which is distinct from but productive of belief. This revision is problematic. As Shah and Velleman (2005, 503) admit, it makes the transition from judgment to belief "ineffable," as though it were merely a contingent fact that in judging that *p* one forms the belief that *p*. The view in the text removes the mystery: judgment *is* intentional belief-formation.

be correct to ϕ without intending to do it. Is there something special about correct belief?²⁴ But our present concern is more mundane. How to make sense of belief-formation governed by the intention to believe the truth, and (allegedly) therefore governed by one's tacit assessment of the evidence? There is an obvious objection:

Reasoning cannot aim at issuing in an acceptance of p if and only if that acceptance would be correct in virtue of p 's being true, because pursuit of that aim would entail first ascertaining whether p is true; and ascertaining whether p is true would entail arriving at a belief with respect to p , as an intermediate step in deliberating whether to believe it. (Shah and Velleman 2005, 519–20)

We cannot be required to form the belief that p as a precursor to judging that p , if judgment is intentional belief-formation.

The solution, according to Shah and Velleman (2005, 520), is that judgment “cannot aim at truth directly [. . .] one cannot aim in the first instance at accepting p if and only if it is true; one must aim at following some truth-conducive method that will lead to its acceptance.” But this is ambiguous. Are we to picture the indirection of judgment as a matter of taking further means, which are designed to issue in true belief? One tries to find supporting evidence, on the basis of which one will come to believe that p if and only if it is true that p . Such truth-conducive means will usually take a more specific form: looking and listening, asking someone else, performing an experiment, examining arguments. But since these means are productive, not constitutive, of belief-formation, they are not ways in which one can form the belief that p intentionally, even as a nonbasic action.²⁵ What we have described is not the mental act of judgment, but epistemically benevolent self-management. It is good to acknowledge this possibility and its importance in our epistemic lives, but wrong to think that, in doing so, we are describing the capacity to judge.²⁶

It follows that the indirection of judgment must be explained in some other way. Perhaps it lies in the fact that judgment is performed for what we might call “indirect reasons.” One does not judge that p on the ground that p , having already formed that belief. Instead, one adverts to facts that one takes, implicitly, as evidence that p . In a simple case, I judge that p on the grounds that q and that *if q , p* . The problem is that, if I am to form the belief that p intentionally as a way of forming a true belief about the question whether p , forming that belief must present itself to me as an appropriate means. Unless I conclude, on the grounds that q and that *if q , p* , that forming the belief that p would be forming a true belief, this will not be so. And since the latter proposition is factive, drawing that conclusion

24. For Shah and Velleman (2005, 510–11), the answer to this question lies in a form of “expressivism” about correctness for belief.

25. See the beginning of section II.

26. A further objection: If judgment is taking productive means to belief-formation, and its deployment of the concept of belief requires that one intend to believe the truth, we leave no room for the deliberate induction of false beliefs by productive means. What about hypnosis and conditioning?

amounts to having already formed the belief that *p*. We are back with the original difficulty.²⁷

As things stand, then, we have failed to arrive at a plausible model of judgment as forming a belief intentionally on the basis of putative evidence, whether the assessment of evidence is explicit or not. Perhaps there is some other way to make sense of this: The present discussion cannot claim to be exhaustive. But it suggests a moral drawn by Gilbert Ryle, in *The Concept of Mind*:

We must distinguish clearly between the sense in which we say that someone is engaged in thinking something out [and] the sense in which we say that so and so is what he thinks [. . .] In the former sense we are talking about work in which a person is at times and for periods engaged. In the latter sense we are talking about the products of such work. The importance of drawing this distinction is that the prevalent fashion is to describe the work of thinking things out in terms borrowed from descriptions of the results reached. We hear stories of people doing such things as judging, abstracting, subsuming, deducing, inducing, predicating, as if these were recordable operations actually executed by particular people at particular stages of their ponderings. [. . . The] words “judgement,” “deduction,” “abstraction,” and the rest properly belong to the classification of the products of pondering and are mis-rendered when they are taken as denoting acts of which pondering consists. (Ryle 1949, chap. IX, sec. 2)

On the one hand, there are the ordinary intentional actions—looking and listening, asking someone else, performing an experiment, examining arguments—that constitute inquiry. And on the other hand, there are the products of inquiry, which are states like judgment, knowledge, and belief. We cannot form a belief intentionally “irrespective of its truth.” And even when we care about truth and evidence, there is no *act* of judgment, in which a belief is formed.²⁸

27. For similar reflections, see Müller (1992, 177–78)—though he persists in thinking of judgment as “intended to be true” (Müller 1992, 176): judgment is “purposeful and intentional but not performed for a reason” (Müller 1992, 179). It is hard to know what to make of this. Why not say instead that judgment is purposive, in that it is somehow aimed at truth, but not intentional or the execution of one’s intention to believe the truth, precisely because it is not performed by taking means to that end? One alternative here is to think of making a judgment as intentionally forming-a-belief-about-the-question-whether-*p* though not intentionally forming the belief that *p* or the belief that *not-p*, as one might intentionally pick a straw without intentionally picking any particular one. It is hard to imagine, however, what constitutive means we could take to this oddly indeterminate act, and the proposal in any case forgoes the primary virtues of conceiving judgment as intentional action. It no longer explains what is active about my attitude to *p* when I make the corresponding judgment, or how I know what I am coming to believe. Instead, we get a view on which it is possible to make a judgment whether *p* while having no idea which judgment one has made.

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