

# Deciding to Believe *Redux*

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(Uncorrected Pre-publication draft)

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## 1. Introduction

The ways in which we exercise intentional agency are varied. I take the domain of intentional agency to include all that we intentionally do versus what *merely* happens to us. So the scope of our intentional agency is not limited to intentional action. One can also exercise some intentional agency in omitting to act and, importantly, in producing the intentional outcome of an intentional action. So, for instance, when an agent is dieting, there is an exercise of agency both with respect to the agent's actions and omissions that constitute her dieting behavior and in achieving the intended outcome of losing weight.

In our mental lives we exercise intentional agency both in performing mental actions and when we intentionally produce certain outcomes at which our mental actions are aimed.<sup>1</sup> The nature and scope of our intentional agency in our mental lives with respect to controlling the acquisition of mental states such as belief, desire, and intention is a topic that is of interest in its own right. In this essay, I will focus solely on our control over coming to believe.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on mental action generally, see the essays in O'Brien and Soteriou 2009. See also Buckareff 2005 and 2007.

Understanding what sort of control we have over our beliefs has far-reaching implications. For instance, theorizing about self-deception and wishful thinking is aided by theorizing about what if any intentional agency we can exercise with respect to acquiring beliefs. Another often mentioned concern that motivates thinking about doxastic agency comes from religion (when conversion requires a change of belief). We also hold persons morally and epistemically responsible for beliefs they have or fail to have.<sup>2</sup> Finally, some deontological theories of epistemic justification require that agents be able to exercise a robust form of doxastic control.<sup>3</sup> Fruitful work on any of these problems requires that we have an account of our intentional agency in acquiring beliefs.

There are at least three loci of doxastic control. The first is over acquiring beliefs. The second is over maintaining beliefs. The third is over how we use our beliefs.<sup>4</sup> I am chiefly concerned with the first locus of doxastic control in this essay, but I will say something about the second locus along the way. Also, I will only consider one way we might exercise control over acquiring beliefs.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, I will present an argument against direct doxastic voluntarism (DDV). By “DDV” I

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<sup>2</sup> There are exceptions to the widespread view that ascriptions of epistemic responsibility are tied to the sort of doxastic control agents may exercise. For instance, David Owens argues that exercises of doxastic control are not subject to epistemic norms. Rather, “the norms of practical reason determine the rationality of the deed” (2000, 82). Such control, he notes, “underwrites a *conditional* responsibility to conform our beliefs to epistemic norms when it is prudent (or morally obligatory) so to do” (2000, 83). Things are no better, according to Owens, if the exercise of doxastic control is like the control exercised over basic actions. He writes that, “the truth or falsity of the claim that we can induce beliefs by means of basic acts has no significance for epistemology, internalist or otherwise” a bit strong (Owens 2000, 85).

<sup>3</sup> Alston 1989, Feldman 2001, Ginet 2001, Nottelmann 2006, Ryan 2003, Steup 2000, and many others, motivate an examination of the tenability of versions of doxastic voluntarism solely by appealing to the debate over deontological conceptions of epistemic justification.

<sup>4</sup> For discussion of the difference between the first and third loci, see Bishop 2007, 28-41.

<sup>5</sup> See Hieronymi 2006 for a useful discussion of different types of control we may exercise over mental states. I discuss some different varieties of doxastic control in Buckareff 2004 and 2011.

mean to refer to the thesis that it is conceptually possible for agents to consciously exercise the same sort of direct voluntary control over coming to acquire a doxastic attitude—such as belief, suspension of belief, and disbelief—that they exercise over uncontroversial basic actions. If DDV is correct, then coming to believe can be a basic action-type.

DDV, or something very close to it, was Bernard Williams' target in his 1973 paper, "Deciding to Believe." Williams's argument is widely regarded as having been a failure. But I think that Williams was on to something in his paper. Hence, in this paper, while I do not attempt to resurrect Williams's argument, I develop and defend a revised argument for a thesis that is quite close to Williams's.

I will proceed as follows. First, I will discuss Bernard Williams' (1973) failed attempt at showing that DDV is conceptually impossible. This will be followed by a discussion of some constraints on our belief-forming activities. I will then clarify my target a bit more than Williams does in his original paper. Finally, I will present my own argument against the conceptual possibility of DDV.

## **2. A Failed Argument**

As I mentioned in the introduction, the core of the debate over DDV with which I am interested in this paper has been over whether it is conceptually possible for an agent to decide to believe that  $p$  and come to believe as a direct result of the intention formed by making a decision—i.e., "at will."<sup>6</sup> Differently stated, the debate

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<sup>6</sup> See Bernard Williams 1973, Brian O'Shaugnessy 1980, and Dion Scott-Kakures 1994 for seminal essays arguing against the conceptual possibility of direct doxastic voluntarism. See Bennett 1990, Funkhouser 2003, Govier 1975, Pieper 1997, and Winters 1979 for critiques of Williams's argument. For a critical response to O'Shaugnessy, see Scott-Kakures 1994, 81-83. For a reply to Scott-Kakures,

has been over whether it is conceptually possible for us to exercise the same sort of control over coming to believe that we exercise over basic intentional actions, where a basic action is an action that is not done by doing anything else.<sup>7</sup> That is, philosophers have been concerned with whether coming to believe can be a basic action-type in its own right (Winters 1979, 243-244).

Most importantly, the debate has been over whether it is conceptually possible for one to exercise basic voluntary control while lacking *any* concern for the epistemic reasons that favor *p* in deciding to believe that *p*. Barbara Winters writes regarding this condition as follows.

This condition is necessary because the philosophical controversy about belief at will concerns whether the model of free basic action can be applied to belief acquisition. If I were free to hold any belief I chose, I could decide to acquire only beliefs which were held by my peers or which I found pleasing. I might even select my beliefs randomly. The salient point is that the issue of a proposition's truth or falsity does not play *any* role in my deliberations about whether or not to believe it; to answer the question, Should I believe that *p* is true? I do not ask, Is *p* true? (1979, 244, emphasis added)

I take it this means that the relevant question in debates over DDV is over whether coming to believe can be a basic action that occurs in response to practical reasons

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see Radcliffe 1997. Finally, Adler 2002, Church 2002, Clarke 1986, Frankish 2007, Pojman 1985, and Setiya 2008 also offer arguments for the conceptual impossibility of direct doxastic voluntarism.

<sup>7</sup> The *locus classicus* for a defense of the distinction between basic and non-basic actions is Danto 1965. It may be argued that deciding is a basic action. This is not obviously the case. If the goal of deciding is to settle on what to do in cases of practical uncertainty (see Mele 2003), then an agent has achieved her goal once she has settled on *A*-ing rather than not-*A*-ing and hence acquired an intention to *A*. What follows from the intention would be a basic action since it is not done by anything else even if caused by the intention.

rather than epistemic reasons.<sup>8</sup> Any putative defense of a version of DDV that relies on an account of doxastic agency being exercised in response to epistemic reasons and/or does not treat the sort of doxastic control as basic voluntary control is a defense of an entirely different thesis. Hence, such theories can be ignored for the purposes of this paper since their defenders are focusing on a different thesis about doxastic agency than the one with which I am concerned in this paper.<sup>9</sup>

Bernard Williams famously argued, in “Deciding to Believe” (1973), that the truth-directedness of belief makes it conceptually impossible for us to exercise the relevant sort of doxastic control at issue in the debate over DDV. It is worth quoting Williams at some length.

[I]t 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. 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 will to 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

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<sup>8</sup> See Bennett 1990, 90 and Audi 2001, 100-104.

<sup>9</sup> So the varieties of doxastic voluntarism defended in McCormick 2011, McHugh forthcoming, Ryan 2003, Steup 2000 and 2008, to the extent that they can be characterized as defenses of direct doxastic voluntarism, are providing defenses of far more modest variants of direct doxastic voluntarism than the version with which I am concerned in this essay.

acquired it at will. 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? (1973, 148)

This argument captures intuitions some philosophers have about the conceptual impossibility of exercising direct voluntary control over belief in response to an intention formed by an act of deciding to believe for practical reasons. But it has been widely regarded as unsuccessful.

Barbara Winters (1979) offered one of the most formidable critiques of Williams' argument. Many other criticisms have followed similar lines of reasoning against Williams.<sup>10</sup> I will focus on Winters' case given that her argument is one of the best known and is often cited.

Winters claims that with a few alterations, the following argument emerges from the above quoted paragraph from Williams (1979, 252-53).

1. Necessarily, if I acquire a belief at will, then I will in full consciousness to acquire it irrespective of its truth.
2. Necessarily, if in full consciousness I will to acquire a belief irrespective of its truth, then after the event it is impossible that I in full consciousness regard it as a belief of mine and also believe that I acquired it at will.

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<sup>10</sup> See Bennett 1990, Funkhouser 2003, Govier 1975, and Pieper 1997 for additional arguments against Williams.

3. Therefore, with regard to no belief could I believe that I had acquired it at will.
4. If, with respect to every acquisition of a belief at will I had performed, it is necessary that I not believe it took place, then I could not know that I was able to acquire beliefs at will.
5. Therefore, I cannot know that I am able to acquire beliefs at will.
6. If I can acquire beliefs at will, I must know that I am able to acquire beliefs at will.
7. Therefore, I cannot acquire beliefs at will.

Winters claims that the problems with Williams' argument lie with (2), (4), and (6). Because of the troubles, Williams' argument is not sound.

Regarding (2), Winters claims that it is too strong. (2) can be contrasted with a weaker principle that I call "SW" for "sustained at will" (1979, 253)<sup>11</sup>:

(SW) Necessarily, it is not the case that someone believes in full consciousness that she believes that  $p$  and that her belief that  $p$  is sustained at will.

Winters notes that "(2) substitutes 'acquired at will' for [SW's] 'sustained at will'" (1979, 253). Winters claims that since a belief can be maintained for reasons different from those involved in its acquisition it is possible that one could believe that some belief was acquired at will so long as one no longer believes that the belief is sustained at will. For instance, one may now have evidence for the truth of the proposition believed (1979, 253). Winters notes that, "These possibilities are

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<sup>11</sup> SW appears as follows in Winters 1979: "Necessarily,  $\sim(\exists x)(\exists p) (x \text{ believes in full consciousness } [x \text{ believes } p \ \& \ x\text{'s belief of [sic.] } p \text{ is sustained at will}])$ " (253).

incompatible with (3), which claims that there could be no belief of mine [past or present, as the antecedent of (4) clarifies] that I could regard as having been acquired at will” (1979, 253).<sup>12</sup> According to Winters, the failure to establish (3) because of troubles with (2) suffices to undermine Williams’ argument for the conceptual impossibility of exercising direct voluntary control over belief.

(4) and (6) are worth considering in the interest of assessing whether the rest of the argument would have been successful if (2) had been better supported. According to Winters, (4) claims that if in any instance it is necessarily false that an agent believes she has exercised the ability to believe at will, then an agent cannot have knowledge of having such an ability. Winters notes that Williams seems to assume that (4) follows from believing at will being an ability one necessarily cannot know one has exercised. She claims that such a principle is false because “I can become aware of capacities I have as a result of extrapolation from other data I have about myself or through the reliable testimony of others” (1979, 254). Furthermore, even if one is never aware of having believed at will, one could know one has the ability to believe at will from observing others coming to believe at will, and by having others report when one does it (Winters 1979, 255).

Finally, regarding (6), Winters notes that, “In (6) Williams maintains that having the ability to acquire beliefs at will requires awareness of its possession” (1979, 255). She takes it that the salient feature of believing at will that motivates (6) may be the requirement that believing at will be a basic action performed in full consciousness. But she adds that, even if this is the case, it does not follow that one

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<sup>12</sup> The bracketed material is in the original.



must be aware of having this ability if one can acquire beliefs at will. One may want to believe that  $p$  and not be aware of one's wanting to believe and similarly acquire an intention that causes one to believe. Upon introspection, one may become aware of epistemic reasons for believing. But it was one's ability to believe at will that caused one to come to believe, even if one's epistemic reasons are sufficient to now fully explain why one continues to have the belief after it is acquired at will. So having an ability does not require that one be aware of one's ability. The upshot is that because of problems with (4) and (6) the transition between (3) and (7) fails. Further considerations Winters entertains are not relevant for my purposes here, so I ignore them in the interest of being succinct.

Winters' argument against Williams' argument for the conceptual impossibility of believing at will is widely regarded as a success. I do have some worries about Winters apparently being committed to the view that one can have the ability to perform a certain type of action, yet never be aware of manifesting that ability when acting. The intentional exercise of an ability would seem to require that one can be and has been aware of the general ability in question. But I will not focus on this point in this paper.

Many of the other critiques of Williams' argument are similarly regarded as having shown that Williams did not show that it is conceptually impossible to believe at will. It does not follow from the success of critiques of Williams' argument, however, that we must accept that it is at least conceptually possible that we can exercise direct voluntary control over coming to believe. In the remainder of

this essay, I offer and defend an argument I believe is impervious to criticisms such as those Winters and others level against Williams.

### **3. Belief, Truth, and Reasons**

In what follows, following Williams, I assume there is a meaningful sense in which correct belief aims at truth or conformity to truth. There are at least two features of belief that are often discussed that are related to the truth-directedness of belief. I discuss both of these in this section along with another feature that is closely related to the first two characteristics. Together, these features will place constraints on how we acquire our beliefs.

First, a propositional attitude is a belief if it represents its content as true in a way that other propositional attitudes (including other cognitive states) do not. This may be due in part to the so-called *direction of fit* of belief. Belief has a *mind-to-world* direction of fit, the mind conforming itself to the world as it is presented to the agent; conative states, like desire and intention, have a *world-to-mind* direction of fit, the functional role of such attitudes would include the conformity of the world to the mind.<sup>13</sup>

The second characteristic of belief related to its truth-directedness has to do with what counts as a reason for belief. Reasons *for* believing that *p* (and *not* merely motivational and explanatory reasons *why* a belief that *p* is worth acquiring/was acquired) are truth-conducive reasons—i.e., broadly, considerations that favor the truth of *p*. Regarding this second feature, it is reasonable to assume that epistemic reasons differ from broadly practical reasons insofar as epistemic reasons bear

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<sup>13</sup> See Anscombe 1963/2000, Searle 1983, and Velleman 2000 for more on direction of fit.

directly on the truth of  $p$  and count in favor of the truth of  $p$ . Practical reasons do not bear directly on the truth of  $p$  and do not count in favor of the truth of  $p$ , but they may count in favor of treating  $p$  as true (see Shah 2006).

Third, from the first-person perspective, the question, “Do I believe that  $p$ ?” is indistinguishable from the question “Is it true that  $p$ ?” (see Edgely 1969; cf. Shah 2003). If I answer that it is not true that  $p$ , then I am not in a good position to answer honestly that I believe that  $p$ .

Going further, if the last claim about the transparency of belief is correct, then we have a toehold for the following further claim. If an agent believes that  $p$ , then she is disposed to believe there is some evidence for  $p$ . This is not to say that the transparency thesis *entails* that to believe that  $p$  is to believe there is some evidence for  $p$ . And I am not claiming that an agent who believes that  $p$  actually *has* adequate evidence for  $p$ . I am only claiming that an agent who believes that  $p$  would be disposed to take it to be the case that there are considerations that count in favor of the truth of  $p$ .

Features of belief suggest that this last claim is justified. Recall what I said about the direction of fit of beliefs from mind-to-world. In believing that  $p$  an agent takes an attitude toward  $p$  that conforms to how the world is presented to her. If the agent’s attitude conforms to the way she takes the world to be presenting itself, then the considerations she acquires her attitude in response to are her reasons for believing that  $p$ . If this is right, then reasons for believing that  $p$  are reasons for holding that it is the case that  $p$ . And any reasons for holding that it is the case that  $p$  would be considerations that count for the truth of  $p$  and, hence, are evidence for  $p$ .

Of course, human agents are so constituted that non-epistemic reasons or other influences may actually play a role in explaining *why* an agent believes as she does. This is the case if the agent's assessment of her evidence is biased or rendered more salient by her motivational states (which are non-epistemic reasons) at the time she evaluates her reasons for belief (as in textbook cases of "straight" self-deception).<sup>14</sup> But this does not mean that from an agent's conscious first-person perspective a belief could somehow be acquired in response to non-epistemic reasons (or that it could be sustained upon introspection).

From this we get a constraint on belief. In order for an agent to *sustain* a belief that *p*, she should be able to identify some evidence for the truth of *p* (see Jones 2002, 2004). I take it this constraint on belief is effective upon an agent's becoming aware that she believes that *p*. If she does not identify *any* evidence, continuing to believe will become impossible (or at least very difficult). For failing to identify evidence places the agent in the position of believing that *p* is true and being disposed to assert that it is the case that *p* while simultaneously both recognizing that there are no epistemic reasons to believe that *p* and also disposed to assert that there is no reason to believe that *p*.

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<sup>14</sup> There is psychological evidence that non-epistemic reasons often make evidence for the proposition an agent comes to believe more salient, causing the agent to acquire a belief in response to her putative epistemic reasons. For recent accessible treatments of the nature of both motivated and unmotivated biased belief, and the way heuristics in unbiased belief affect beliefs in ways that suggest that even beliefs acquired in the face of contrary evidence nonetheless seem to be shaped by evidence (because of motivated or cold biasing), see Mele 2001, ch. 2; and Nisbett and Ross 1980. Such shaping of belief by evidence, along with belief's being truth-directed is even evident in cases of persons who suffer from conditions such as Capgras delusion – the chief symptom of which is that sufferers believe that one or more close relatives have been replaced by an impostor. For a fascinating discussion of delusional beliefs that suggests that such beliefs, even when they fail to cohere with an agent's related beliefs, aim at truth and are shaped by evidence, see Stone and Young 1997, pp. 327–364.

The transparency of belief has consequences for *acquiring* beliefs as well. From the standpoint of conscious first-person doxastic deliberation, deliberating about whether to believe that *p* must include considering whether *p* is true and reasons for the truth of *p*. Admittedly, one may engage in practical deliberation about *bringing it about* that one comes to believe that *p*, considering non-epistemic reasons that favor believing that *p*. But such practical reasoning aimed at bringing it about that one comes to believe that *p* is different from what one is doing when engaging in doxastic deliberation.

Nishi Shah contends that from the first-person doxastic deliberative standpoint “the question *whether to believe that p* seems to collapse into the question *whether p is true*” (2003, p. 447; see also Shah 2006). He writes that, “A corollary to this hypothesis is that reasons for an affirmative answer to the question *whether to believe that p* must be considerations that are taken as relevant of the truth of *p*” (2003, 449). Shah argues that it is not merely a psychological fact about human agents that there is a “seamless shift in focus from belief to truth.” He asserts that it is “something demanded by the nature of first-personal doxastic deliberation” (2003, 447). Given this feature of doxastic deliberation from the first-person standpoint, if an agent is considering whether to believe that *p*, then she is considering whether *p* is true. Thus, if an agent is in a position to answer affirmatively to either the question whether to believe that *p* or whether *p* is true, then she must take herself to have some evidence for the truth of *p* and she must regard her belief that *p* as based on her relevant putative evidence.

It may be argued at this point that what I am claiming about belief acquisition cannot be correct. What about acquiring beliefs on the basis of a hunch? Certainly a hunch is not evidence. So what I am claiming about evidence and belief-acquisition cannot be right.<sup>15</sup>

I do not wish to claim that a hunch really *is* evidence or that it can never count as evidence. But if an agent can successfully acquire a belief on the basis of a hunch, then I take it that the agent regards her hunch as having evidential value (most likely more evidential value than it actually has). This may occur in cases where someone is credulous. Someone who is more skeptical may afford a hunch no evidential value at all. Another case where a hunch may be taken to have more evidential value than it really has would be a case of motivated belief. Suppose that in such a case what is believed on the basis of a hunch is something the agent wants to be true. The hunch, accordingly, is assigned evidential value that it may in fact lack. What matters is that the agent takes the hunch to count in favor of the truth of *p*. But if a hunch is taken to lack any evidential value by an agent, then honest reflection on whether to believe that *p* on the basis of the hunch will result in a failed attempt at coming to believe that *p*.

I am sure there are more objections that can be raised to what I have asserted in this section. For now, however, I will simply take it for granted that the claims I have made about constraints on belief are at least *prima facie* plausible.

#### **4. *Contra* DDV**

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<sup>15</sup> This objection was raised by Rico Vitz.

In this section, I argue against the conceptual possibility of exercising direct voluntary control over coming to believe by simply deciding to believe for practical reasons alone.<sup>16</sup> More specifically, I shall argue that an agent cannot consciously exercise such control over coming to believe. The relevant sort of doxastic control would require that an agent be able to consciously exercise direct voluntary control over coming to believe on the basis of an intention formed by making a practical decision to believe, where the decision and subsequent event of coming to believe are motivated by practical reasons alone.

#### **4.1. Deciding and Judging**

In what follows, I should be understood as referring to practical decisions when I use 'deciding' and its cognates. I will take a practical decision to be a momentary mental action of actively forming an intention in response to practical reasons in order to resolve some practical uncertainty that arises when deliberating about what to do in some situation.<sup>17</sup> So in asking whether it is conceptually possible for an agent to consciously decide to believe, the challenge is to determine whether the following process is conceptually possible. First, an agent consciously deliberates about practical considerations that favor believing that *p* versus not believing that *p*. Next, the agent, being unable to settle on what to do, consciously decides to believe that *p*, thereby consciously forming an intention to believe that *p*. Finally, the agent

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<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that my argument is similar to an arguments offered by Adler 2002, chapter 2. Church 2002, Clarke 1986, O'Shaughnessy 1980, Scott-Kakures 1994, and others. I will not rehearse the differences between their arguments and the one offered here.. I acknowledge the similarities between the arguments while also noting that critics of our strategies cannot simply offer a one-size-fits all response to any of the arguments against the conceptual possibility of direct doxastic voluntarism. The differences, as one should expect, between authors are subtle in places and more obvious in others.

<sup>17</sup> See Mele 2003,197-214, for a defense of such an account of deciding.

is aware of being caused to come to believe that  $p$  straightaway by the intention and the agent is aware of doing so in response to the practical reasons that favor acquiring a belief that  $p$ . It is this process that I am claiming is conceptually impossible.

I will assume that there is an analogous phenomenon to making a practical decision when we enter the theoretical sphere where doxastic deliberation occurs. Marking out their differences and similarities will be useful for what is to follow.

First, regarding decision-making, making a decision is required in cases where an agent lacks the time and cognitive resources necessary to resolve some practical uncertainty by more extended methods such as further evaluation of practical reasons, etc. An example of this may be an agent having to get settled on what she will order when out for dinner with a group of people when she is asked what she will have from the menu. Notice that when one makes a decision and forms an intention by doing so the acquisition of an intention is the intentional outcome of the decision. But it is not the case that the intention to  $A$  is the *intended* outcome—*i.e., the specific intention acquired with its content was not intended*. Rather, the outcome of acquiring an intention (whether to  $A$  or refrain from  $A$ -ing) is intentional. Of course, the agent intends to make up her mind (acquire an intention). And she partially executes this intention by deciding (along with deliberating). But the agent, in deciding to  $A$ , does not decide to acquire the intention to  $A$ ; and the reasons for deciding are simply reasons for  $A$ -ing. But that the intention itself is not the intentional object of the mental action of deciding does not make it any less the intentional outcome of the decision. It is no less intentional



than each step one takes when walking to the store in order to get some bread. One does not intend to take each step, but each step is an intentional movement.<sup>18</sup>

When trying to settle on what to believe, judging (or, if you prefer, a doxastic-decision) may play a similar functional role in the economy of making up our minds about what to believe that practical decisions play in making up our minds about how to act. There may be some important differences between judging that  $p$  and deciding to  $A$ . But they are more alike than dissimilar. For instance, judging is something an agent does by which she terminates doxastic deliberation and comes to acquire a belief in cases where the agent must make up her mind and get settled on what to believe. Judging is something done in response to theoretical reasons just as practical decisions are performed in response to practical reasons. In judging, an agent (at least partially) executes her intention to make up her mind about whether it is the case that  $p$ . Additionally, an agent may acquire a belief by judging just as she may acquire an intention by deciding. Finally, if we suppose that an agent can judge in cases of feeling theoretically uncertain just as one can decide in cases of feeling practically uncertain, we can regard the strength of the attitude acquired in either case to be determined by the strength of the reasons that cause the formation of the attitude. So an agent may acquire a partial belief in response to judging and a partial intention in response to a decision. In either case, the strength of the attitude (in a rational agent) is fixed by the reasons that count in favor of the attitude taken (see Holton 2008). So it is not necessary that a token of either type of mental action

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<sup>18</sup> I am here assuming that the Simple View of intentional action is incorrect and that the Single Phenomenon View is correct. For defenses of versions of the Single Phenomenon View, see Bratman 1997, Brand 1997, and Mele 1992. For defenses of the Simple View, see Adams 1986, Garcia 1990, and McCann 1998.

result in full belief or full intention. In both cases, the attitude formed can only be formed in response to reasons and its strength reflects the strength of the reasons for which it is acquired. In fact, it is more conceptually and psychologically realistic to regard either type of mental action as resulting in an attitude that is weaker than an attitude that is acquired on the basis of deliberation that terminated naturally with the agent feeling psychologically certain about what she will do or what she believes.

Finally, there is one important difference between deciding and judging. When we judge, it is in order to make up our minds about what to believe or what to take as true. When we decide, we do so in order to make up our minds about what to do. We do not decide in order to make up our minds about what to intend. This difference may prove to be important in what follows.<sup>19</sup>

#### **4.2. The Case Against DDV**

If an agent engages in *doxastic* deliberation, then an agent is deliberating about what sort of doxastic attitude to take towards a proposition. Assuming that the claims made above about belief, truth, and reasons are correct, then the reasons an agent consciously considers in doxastic deliberation are what the agent takes to be epistemic reasons, that is, the agent considers (putative) evidence for the truth of a proposition. So the belief formed by doxastic deliberation will be based on what an agent takes to be epistemic reasons. However, if an agent is engaging in practical deliberation about how to decide with respect to what to believe, then the agent is considering *practical* reasons in his deliberation. Practical reasons are non-

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<sup>19</sup> In Buckareff 2011 I discuss forming beliefs and forming intentions in more depth.

evidential considerations. They are not reasons that count in favor of the truth of  $p$ . So, in the practical case, an agent is not deliberating about what to believe. At best, he is deliberating about what it would be best to come to believe for practical reasons. That is, he is considering reasons for the desirability of believing that  $p$  and for deciding to believe that  $p$ , but he is not deliberating about reasons *for* believing that  $p$ .

The differences between cases of doxastic and practical deliberation are highlighted by contrasting two cases of deliberation—one doxastic and one practical. I propose comparing a case of doxastic deliberation versus practical deliberation where the purpose is the same. Namely, in both cases, the agent is trying to make up his mind about whether to believe  $p$  or believe not- $p$ . By contrasting these cases, I hope to show that in the practical case, coming to believe on the basis of settling some practical deliberation by making a practical decision is conceptually impossible.

#### *4.1.1. Doxastic deliberation over whether to believe that $p$*

Consider two scenarios. In the first, an agent is deliberating over whether to believe that  $p$  or  $\sim p$ . The agent considers the evidence he has that counts in favor of  $p$  and the evidence that favors  $\sim p$ . If the agent concludes that the evidence favors  $p$  over  $\sim p$ , then the agent will simply end his deliberation by acquiring the appropriate belief.

In the second scenario, the agent deliberates and reaches an impasse, with the preponderance of his evidence not clearly favoring  $p$  over  $\sim p$ . I take it there are a few things that the agent can do. First, the agent may simply suspend belief by

terminating deliberation and not acquiring any belief. Second, the agent may be unable to acquire a belief and, perhaps owing to practical pressures, non-doxastically accept that  $p$ , where non-doxastically accepting that  $p$  is a way of regarding  $p$  as true without believing  $p$ .<sup>20</sup> Finally, the agent may judge that  $p$  (in the relevant sense of 'judge' articulated in the previous sub-section of this essay). In that case, the agent may take the evidence to favor  $p$  slightly over  $\sim p$ , but in order to acquire a belief the agent must make the mental effort involved in the mental action of judging that  $p$ . In the judging case, the agent will acquire a belief the strength of which is proportionate to the reasons the agent takes himself to have for believing that  $p$ . In what follows, I will ignore the second option. I will discuss the first and third options. But I will focus on the third option since, as I contended in the previous sub-section, I take the third option to be the theoretical analogue to practical deciding.

Now in both the first and third scenarios, the agent is deliberating about what to believe. In the first scenario, I assume that the belief acquired is full-belief, with the agent taking his evidence to clearly support  $p$  over  $\sim p$ . In the third scenario, the agent's evidence does not decisively favor  $p$  over  $\sim p$ . Hence, if the agent judges that  $p$  and acquires a belief as a result, the belief acquired will be significantly weaker than in the first scenario.

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<sup>20</sup> My own views on belief and non-doxastic acceptance most closely approximate the views of Bratman 1992; Shah and Velleman 2005; Stalnaker 1987; and Velleman 2000c. Other accounts of the distinction have been offered by Alston 1996; Bishop 2002 and 2007; Cohen 1992; Engel 1998; Frankish 2004; and Tuomela 2000. There are significant differences between these authors. However, they all defend a distinction between belief and non-doxastic acceptance. The differences they claim for each are close enough for their respective theories to bear a family resemblance to one another. My own views have changed over time, but I am still in basic agreement with the main features of the general account of non-doxastic acceptance I outline in Buckareff 2004 and 2005.

Importantly, if the agent in either scenario was self-aware, being conscious of what he was doing in deliberating about his epistemic reasons, then the entire process would be one in which the agent is sensitive to what considerations favor  $p$  over  $\sim p$ . The agent would be able to indicate what reasons favor  $p$  over  $\sim p$  when deliberating and would be aware of why he settles on  $p$  over  $\sim p$ . Finally, the belief would be one that the agent would be able to immediately recognize as having resulted from a process of considering what epistemic reasons the agent took himself to have for believing either statement. Hence, the agent would not be running afoul of the constraints on belief that I discussed in section 3.

#### *4.1.2. Practical deliberation over whether to believe that $p$*

Now suppose that an agent is deliberating about whether or not to believe that  $p$  or believe that  $\sim p$ . In this case, the agent is only considering practical reasons. The agent does not consider any epistemic reasons. This scenario would be like deliberating about whether or not to have another glass of wine with one's meal. The focus would be solely on practical considerations that favors believing that  $p$  versus believing that  $\sim p$ . So what is being deliberated about are *not* considerations that favor the truth of  $p$  versus  $\sim p$ .

Consider two scenarios. Suppose in the first scenario that the agent concludes that she will believe that  $p$  on the basis of her deliberation, simply acquiring the intention to believe that  $p$  without having to make a decision. In the second scenario, the agent is faced with some practical uncertainty. Hence, she must make up her mind about whether she will believe that  $p$  or believe that  $\sim p$ . She decides to believe that  $p$ , thereby forming the intention to believe that  $p$ . If we

suppose that the agent can get as far as acquiring an intention, whether or not she must decide to settle some practical uncertainty, can she successfully come to believe? That is, can she successfully execute her intention to believe that  $p$ ?

Remember, the agent is aware of what she is doing throughout the process being described above. Hence, I take it that the agent is aware of the sort of reasons for which she would be coming to believe. Assuming that the process is one of which the agent is continuously aware, even if the agent could successfully form the intention to believe, the agent would be unable to execute her intention without performing some other actions to produce the belief. Assuming any success in coming to believe as a result, the agent would not be exercising basic voluntary control. It would be indirect control.

Any success in immediately coming to believe in this case would require that the agent would have to successfully execute a present-directed intention to believe that  $p$  now while being unaware of any epistemic reasons supporting  $p$ . She would have to be able to come to explicitly represent  $p$  as true in the way fitting for a belief being fully aware that she is doing so only for reasons that do not bear at all on truth of  $p$ . I suggest that this is conceptually impossible given the constraints on belief acquisition and maintenance articulated in the previous section.

It is worth stopping for a moment and comparing this case of practical deliberation aimed at settling on what to believe with the case of coming to believe on the basis of doxastic deliberation. In the case of practical deliberation, what is assumed is that no epistemic reasons are considered. In this case, the entire process involves considering reasons that count in favor of believing that  $p$  being

worthwhile. In the case of doxastic deliberation, the entire process involves thinking about epistemic reasons that count in favor or against the truth of  $p$ . In other words, in the case of doxastic deliberation, the process is directed at determining whether  $p$  or  $\sim p$  is true and what reasons favor either option. In the case of practical deliberation, there is no concern for the reasons that favor the truth of  $p$  or  $\sim p$ . To the extent that there is any consideration of epistemic reasons, the agent is only considering what counts in favor of it being true that believing that  $p$  or believing that  $\sim p$  is the more worthwhile option. The agent is in no position to answer whether  $p$  is true if asked once she forms the intention to believe that  $p$ . And if the transparency thesis is correct, the agent would not be able to answer whether she thinks  $p$  is true. That was not what she was thinking about when engaging in practical deliberation. She can answer that she thinks that believing that  $p$  is worthwhile. But since she cannot honestly answer whether she thinks  $p$  is true, she is in no position to answer that she believes that  $p$ . She does not. Absent some sort of sudden awareness of apparent epistemic reasons for believing that  $p$ , any such attempt at immediately believing that  $p$  on the basis of her intention to believe that  $p$  would be unsuccessful. And, *ex hypothesi*, such a sudden awareness of putative epistemic reasons is ruled out since the attempt at coming to believe that  $p$  is supposed to be made solely for practical reasons.

If the foregoing is correct, then coming to believe is not a basic action-type. DDV is untenable. It is conceptually impossible to exercise conscious direct voluntary control over coming to believe just like one would exercise over an uncontroversial basic action. The agent cannot get past acquiring an intention to

believe that  $p$  because of the constraints on belief articulated in section 3 of this paper.

Any success an agent may enjoy in executing the intention to come to believe immediately would require changing things so much as to have something that could no longer be accurately described as a basic action performed solely for practical reasons. For instance, someone may argue that an agent could execute an intention to come to believe that  $p$  now if there is an intervener who, being aware of the agent's intention, somehow manipulates the agent so she comes to believe. In any such case, the agent's coming to believe would not be an action, much less a basic action. This is so because any such intervention will result in coming to believe being the consequence of a deviant causal process that makes what happens in coming to believe not count as a basic action. Events and processes that result from causal deviance, including causal chains involving an intervener, are taken to fail to count as actions in the action theoretic literature.<sup>21</sup> And what holds in the case of an intervener is true of any process that bypasses the normal causal route from an intention to some behavior. Causal deviance of any sort threatens the actional status of a mental event or process. So coming to believe that results from a deviant causal process cannot be a basic action.

It may also be suggested that the agent could execute her intention if she suddenly became aware of epistemic reasons after forming her intention to believe now. With respect to the latter, if the agent comes to believe for a mixture of

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<sup>21</sup> Exploring why causal deviance is a problem for actions is beyond the scope of this essay. I suggest that interested readers consult the introduction and essays in Aguilar and Buckareff 2010 as well as Bishop 1989 for more on causal deviance.



practical and epistemic reasons, where the epistemic reasons are acquired after forming the intention to believe that  $p$ , then we have a case where coming to believe is no longer based entirely on practical reasons. Hence, we would no longer be dealing with a case of exercising DDV-type control.

The argument that emerges from the foregoing is the following. I trust that I have provided ample reasons for accepting each of the premises.

1. Necessarily, if I can successfully consciously execute an intention to immediately come to believe that  $p$ , then my coming to believe that  $p$  could be caused in full consciousness solely by an intention to believe that  $p$  formed by deciding to believe that  $p$  on the basis of practical reasons alone.
2. Necessarily, if my coming to believe that  $p$  could have been solely caused in full consciousness by an intention to believe that  $p$  formed by deciding to believe that  $p$  on the basis of practical reasons alone, then I can consciously come to believe on the basis of practical reasons alone.
3. But, I cannot consciously come to believe on the basis of practical reasons alone.
4. Therefore, I cannot successfully consciously execute an intention to immediately come to believe that  $p$ .

That this argument resembles Williams' and others that have been offered should be apparent to those familiar with the literature. But my strategy differs in some important ways.

First, I am not simply emphasizing coming to believe without having any concern for the truth of  $p$  or without any concern for any considerations that count in favor of the truth of  $p$ . Second, I am not allowing for the possibility of an agent coming to believe and then losing the belief.

Regarding the first point, I am arguing that it is conceptually impossible to execute an intention to believe that  $p$  where the only reasons considered are practical reasons and no epistemic reasons that bear on the truth of  $p$  are considered at any point in the process. Absent some sudden awareness of apparent or actual epistemic reasons for believing that  $p$  or some sort of intervention, such an intention cannot be executed. In the event of any such awareness of epistemic reasons or the intervention of some third party, the case will no longer be one of successfully executing an intention to believe on the basis of practical reasons alone or it will fail to be a case of a genuine basic action due to the deviant causal chain that would obtain between the intention and coming to believe. As for the second point, my claim is that successfully executing an intention to come to believe solely for practical reasons is conceptually impossible. It is not a matter of acquiring and then losing the belief. My claim is that an agent could not get past acquiring an intention, much less successfully execute it only to lose the belief. If I am right, then my argument is immune to the objections raised by Winters to Williams' argument.

## **5. Conclusion**

I believe I have shown that it is conceptually impossible to successfully exercise direct voluntary control over coming to believe on the basis of practical reasons alone. I have not shown, however, that an agent cannot exercise direct voluntary

control over coming to believe on the basis of some mixture of epistemic and practical reasons. Of course, whether or not my own attempt at showing that DDV is conceptually impossible will finally be regarded by anyone as successful remains to be seen. But if I have succeeded in achieving the goal of this essay, then we can be assured that there is at least one type of doxastic agency we cannot exercise. Again this does not mean that the door is closed on the conceptual possibility of agents exercising any other species of direct doxastic control. But I have my doubts.<sup>22</sup>

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