

**Online Radicalization and Voluntary Belief (1985 WORDS)**

**Abstract.** I discuss voluntary belief in the context of a phenomenon unique to our current political moment: self-brainwashing. Using the very public QAnon movement as a case study, I argue that, although the conditions in which QAnon beliefs are formed is highly similar to those that produce false confessions, the QAnon believer and not the false confessor is morally and epistemically responsible because the former's beliefs are voluntary: belief is voluntary when the believer has both the capacity and the opportunity to revise their belief. I conclude that this voluntariness is because of the uniquely distributed, Internet-based nature of QAnon.

Police interrogation techniques, particularly the controversial Reid technique, can induce 'coerced-internalized' false confessions: false confessions where the subject sincerely believes in their own guilt (1). Police using the Reid technique induce these confessions through, among other tactics, isolation, sleep deprivation, inducement of fear for one's physical safety, and bombardment with disinformation (2). When such interrogation leads one to falsely believe that he has committed a crime, we should clearly not consider him to have done something epistemically or morally wrong, even though his belief is both false and harmful. What is less clear, however, is what to make of one who holds false and harmful beliefs due to these same tactics, but who was a willing participant in their own isolation, sleep deprivation, fear, and disinformation: one who has, in effect, brainwashed himself.

To see that this is possible, we need look no further than the very public QAnon movement where—unlike more secretive radicalization programs, such as those we might associate with Islamic terror or far-right militias—one can witness, in real time, otherwise ordinary, level-headed people spending all night on the Internet, pushing away concerned loved ones, and living in fear of Satanic ritual child abuse; all the while consuming a steady diet of mis- and disinformation from sources ranging from the anonymous imageboard 8kun to the former President.<sup>1</sup>

There is something different about the sincere false belief that one has committed a crime and the sincere false belief that “The government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation”<sup>2</sup>, although their proximal causes—duress—are the same. However, I claim that the former believes involuntarily and so has done nothing epistemically or morally wrong; while the latter believes voluntarily and so has done wrong.

We might want to point to the self-brainwasher's willing participation as the source of the difference. Were this straightforwardly about actions, that would suffice. However, a number of authors have argued that, regardless of how one comes to hold a particular belief, it is never voluntary and therefore can never be assessed for epistemic or moral goodness or badness. This is doxastic involuntarism, the orthodox view in epistemology: no belief is ever held voluntarily, and so we cannot say that anyone ought or ought not believe some proposition (3,4). It would mean that, whatever the intuitive difference is between the coerced suspect and the QAnon believer, it cannot be about (rational or moral) evaluation of belief. I find this implausible.

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to QAnon, see (11).

<sup>2</sup> In a Public Religion Research Institute poll, 15% of Americans endorsed this exact statement (12).

Doxastic involuntarism rejects the possibility of setting out to intentionally cause oneself to believe some proposition. Williams rejects this possibility on the basis that such a project is either fundamentally not about belief but about making something true of the world, or it is so irrational that we are deeply psychologically resistant to it (4). Alston rejects the idea that even highly motivated evidence-seeking is sufficient for intentionally inducing a belief. Rather, we “form the most rational attitude, whatever that may be” based on the evidence we encounter, rather than evidence-seeking being “undertaken with the intention of taking up a certain particular attitude toward a particular proposition” (3).

There are a few *prima facie* reasons that we might think that some conspiratorial belief is actually voluntary in precisely this way. For one, we might think that the rampancy of QAnon beliefs speaks against the irrationality of a project producing psychological resistance.<sup>3</sup> More speculatively, the idea of evidence-seeking for ‘taking up a certain particular attitude toward a particular proposition’ is not so straightforwardly rejectable. For instance, it would be wrong to claim that most QAnon believers want it to be *true* that Satan-worshipping pedophiles have infiltrated the highest levels of power.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it is reasonable to think that hearing this stated for the first time did not in itself produce the belief.<sup>5</sup> It seems to me that it produces, in some individuals, a desire to believe, which produces evidence-seeking with precisely the intention that Alston rejects.

This sort of account, however, is insufficient for the project of demonstrating responsibility for beliefs generally, as a parsimonious account ought: we do not form most of our beliefs in the way that some QAnon believers form some of theirs, but there ought still be instances where we are epistemically or morally in the right or wrong. To this end, I suggest that we look to several distinctions made in the philosophy of action.

The first distinction is between intentionality and voluntariness. Intentional actions are done for reasons: one  $\phi$ -d because one formed and then willfully carried out an intention to  $\phi$  (5,6). However, many actions are unintentional but not plausibly involuntary. These are “merely voluntary actions,” which includes behaviors like foot-tapping and fidgeting (6). Though not intentionally initiated, these actions are voluntary because they can be intentionally stopped or continued. If you ask me to stop tapping my foot, I can decide to stop or continue; I could not do so if you asked me to stop hiccupping. This distinction compels us to ask not whether someone can intentionally *start* believing something, but whether they can intentionally *stop* or *continue* believing it.

Interestingly, involuntarists find the latter unobjectionable. Williams notes an asymmetry that makes intentional forgetting “more acceptable” than intentional believing (4). C.S. Peirce, who held that beliefs are formed automatically and without justification, also held that justification is psychologically required whenever it is genuinely in question whether we ought to rescind or maintain a belief (7). In fact, two authors posit just this sort of view of reevaluation and revision

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<sup>3</sup> Williams explains the psychological resistance: “It might be that a project of this kind tended in the end to involve total destruction of the world of reality, to lead to paranoia” (4). This reality-shattering paranoia is reflected in a number of wrenching testimonials from those who have left QAnon (13).

<sup>4</sup> Compare this with Williams’ man who wants it to be true that his son is alive (4).

<sup>5</sup> Although cf. (14), which I lack the space to discuss. However, entertain the proposition quoted from the PRRI poll, and see if you believe it.

(though they stop short of concluding that believing itself is thereby voluntary). Rott’s “negative doxastic voluntarism” claims that beliefs come automatically and uncontrollably, whereas reconsidering beliefs and rescinding or maintaining them is deliberative and consciously controlled (8). Helton’s “argument from the norm of revision” claims that one ought revise belief in the face of counterevidence and, where there is a rational ought, there is “a robust psychological ‘can’” (9).

The second distinction is between the ‘can of capacity’ and the ‘can of opportunity’ (6). Helton, in supporting the norm of revision, argues that we can be blameworthy for things that are outside our voluntary control – here, for failing to revise a belief in the face of counterevidence. We are blameworthy for this because of our ‘can of capacity’: the facts that we have the psychological capacity to revise a belief, we have counterevidence, and yet we fail to revise it, make us blameworthy. This is insufficient, for the following reason. Say I am being interrogated with the Reid technique, and it induces in me a false belief that I committed a murder, despite my counterevidence: I remember watching TV at home at the time the murder took place. I have the belief that I COMMITTED THE MURDER. I have counterevidence. I have the psychological capacity to revise the belief. Yet my failing to revise this belief is not something for which I am blameworthy (nor is it voluntary, on my view).<sup>6</sup> This is because I lack the ‘can of opportunity’: the nature of these coercive interrogations—the stress, the fear, the prevention of denials<sup>7</sup>—is precisely such as to deprive one of the opportunity to reevaluate and consider whether and how to revise one’s beliefs.

The ingredients of a voluntary belief, then, are that one has both the capacity and the opportunity to reconsider and potentially revise that belief when faced with counterevidence. The self-brainwashed have this; the interrogated do not.

This is a unique feature of Internet radicalization. Classic cult indoctrination techniques are interrogation techniques— isolation, sleep deprivation, fear—, and they are unpleasant, often requiring recruits to be held against their will.<sup>8</sup> That is, as in Reid interrogations, recruits are denied the opportunity to revise beliefs. But when one comes to hold these beliefs through Internet habits, one is only a few clicks away from all the counterevidence in the world. Moreover, leaders and fellow members can be shut out by putting down one’s device – providing plenty of opportunity for reconsidering one’s beliefs without coercion. It might be uncomfortable to break one’s nightly conspiracy-surfing habit. It might also be uncomfortable to kick a foot-tapping habit. But so long as it can be kicked—even if it never is—it is voluntary, and one is responsible for it.

Of course, habit can slide into addiction.<sup>9</sup> QAnon has also spread into the real world in ways that bear a disturbing resemblance to offline cults (10). Nonetheless, I caution against minimizing

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<sup>6</sup> She notes that although the obligation to revise can be “trumped by other obligations,” it still “retains [its] force” (9). However, falsely confessing to a crime is not something mandated by “obligations of morality, prudence, or other obligations of rationality” (*ibid.*); it is not an obligation at all.

<sup>7</sup> A widely-used interrogation manual (15) discusses how to minimize the number of times the subject is able to deny the accusation.

<sup>8</sup> Often by threats of, or real, physical violence – like the infamous Jonestown shooting.

<sup>9</sup> However, addiction literature—particularly social media addiction literature—distinguishes the two by saying that habit, and not addiction, “largely align[s] with personal interests” (16). I venture that far-right radicalization ‘largely aligns with the personal interests’ of those radicalized, at least at first.

believers' culpability. Insofar as their beliefs are voluntary, they are doing epistemic and moral wrong.

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