

## Voluntary Belief on a Reasonable Basis

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Abstract: A person presented with adequate but not conclusive evidence for a proposition is in a position voluntarily to acquire a belief in that proposition, or to suspend judgment about it. The availability of doxastic options in such cases grounds a moderate form of doxastic voluntarism not based on practical motives, and therefore distinct from pragmatism. In such cases, belief-acquisition or suspension of judgment meets standard conditions on willing: it can express stable character traits of the agent, it can be responsive to reasons, and it is compatible with a subjective awareness of the available options.

The view that belief-formation is sometimes voluntary has fallen out of favor.<sup>1</sup> It is now commonly thought that belief-formation could be voluntary only on some form of pragmatism, the view that belief-formation is (or can be) undertaken on the basis of practical motives. In this paper, I present a contrary position. Belief-formation need not be undertaken on the basis of practical motives in order to be voluntary. The doxastic will determines belief on the basis of

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<sup>1</sup> Even those who claim that the will is central to our cognitive mental life distance themselves from serious forms of voluntarism. See, for example, Roberts and Wood 2007, 62–3.

epistemic reasons. It provides epistemic motives.<sup>2</sup> I focus on cases of belief-formation in which one comes to think that one has adequate evidence for  $p$ , and so comes to believe  $p$ .<sup>3</sup> In these cases, it is reasonable but not rationally mandatory to hold that there is adequate evidence for  $p$ , and there are no strong non-epistemic reasons to believe  $p$  (e.g., that believing  $p$  would make one happier). The fact that there is more than one rationally permissible doxastic option, together with the reason-responsiveness of the belief that  $p$ , together make it plausible that the formation of the belief that  $p$  is voluntary.

The view I propose takes the limits of voluntary belief seriously. I concede a strong form of evidentialism, according to which belief always commits one to the judgment that there is evidence. I also concede that conclusive evidence, when grasped by a doxastic subject, must induce belief. This view or something like it has had a number of influential recent advocates, such as Bernard Williams, David Owens, Jonathan Adler, and Pamela Hieronymi. It is said that “belief aims at the truth” and that agents, realizing this, must be bound by this aim inasmuch as they wish to qualify as believers (rather than as wishful thinkers, say).<sup>4</sup> On my reading, as I will

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<sup>2</sup> I assume an intuitive distinction between epistemic and practical (or instrumental) rationality. For a defense of this distinction, see Kelly 2003, Hieronymi 2005.

<sup>3</sup> I am not supposing that we need to interpose a felt desire in order to explain how a doxastic subject gets from consideration of evidence to belief. I think that although agents sometimes do have such a desire, it is hardly the normal case. Cf. Fairweather 2001, 72–3.

<sup>4</sup> Williams 1973; Owens 2000; Adler 2002; Hieronymi 2006. In a recent paper, Nishi Shah and J. David Velleman argue for a strong form of evidentialism. Their view, like mine, identifies suspension of judgment as a vehicle for choice; moreover, they hold that we can deliberate about what to believe, and that it is possible to choose to suspend judgment. But on their view this does not allow for voluntary or chosen belief, for they avow that “Deciding what to believe is ... impossible” (2005, 502). However, this is because Shah and Velleman understand the expression “believe at will” as equivalent to “believing arbitrarily” (504–5). That is not how I have construed the role of the will here: in my cases, belief is not arbitrary, and the agent does not think of it as arbitrary.

explain later, this restricts voluntary belief because it restricts the *options* available to the doxastic subject.

My paper has three main parts. In the first two sections, I describe the cases I have in mind and characterize them. In the third section, I argue that they meet standard conditions on the will. In the last two sections, I anticipate some philosophical objections against these cases of voluntary belief, and present my rebuttals. For the sake of simplicity, throughout the paper I shall assume that the principle doxastic states are full belief and suspension of judgment. However, my position could, I think, be adapted to a framework allowing degrees of belief, or partial belief.

## **I. Target Cases**

Suppose I have lived for three years in an area where I have never heard the sound of a train, although I have observed some seemingly unused train tracks. I do not know whether the train tracks have fallen into disrepair. One morning, as I am working, I hear the sound of a train whistle, and I feel the distinctive vibration of a locomotive. This, I propose, is a situation in which I am in a position voluntarily to adopt the belief that there is a locomotive nearby. I accomplish this by taking the reasons I have to support that belief. But I have more than one reasonable option. I may take the sound of the locomotive to provide adequate reason to believe that there is a locomotive, or I may take it not to provide adequate reason for that belief. Both responses are reasonable. On the one hand, since I have never seen trains in the area, how likely is it that there is suddenly a train here now? On the other hand, the sounds and vibration are unmistakable — what else could produce them but a train? I may think, “How remarkable —

there is a train nearby!”, or I may think, while suspending belief: “How odd — the sounds of a train. This requires investigation.”

A second, similar case is one in which I come to believe some surprising testimony. Suppose my roommate, a serious and sincere person, announces to me that he has just been outside and seen a three-foot lizard in the driveway. I have never seen such a large lizard in the area before, and I have some reason to doubt whether any lizards of that size live naturally in the area. Here again, I think, is a case in which I am in a position to take my roommate’s testimony as providing adequate reason to believe that there was a three-foot lizard in the driveway, or to suspend belief and demand more evidence. If I do adopt the belief that there was such a lizard, it will, I propose, be voluntarily so.

These are not the sorts of case that have typically been entertained by those who discuss the voluntariness of belief. Typical cases from the literature are those in which a belief is sought for reasons that have little or nothing to do with whether it is true, and in which the belief itself is not taken to be supported adequately by the available reasons. They are cases in which a person wants, desires, or intends to believe a particular proposition for egoistic, practical, moral, or spiritual — in a word, non-epistemic — reasons: e.g., propositions such as “God exists,” or “I am a winner.” In my view, because of the very features that make these cases interesting, they tend to distract our attention from the question of whether belief is voluntary. We must consider a broader range of cases, including those in which a person adopts a belief in a situation where there are no particularly pressing non-epistemic reasons to believe it.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Carl Ginet argues that we can decide to believe, in “Deciding to Believe,” in Matthias Steup, ed., *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001): 62–76. In Ginet’s cases, the believer *counts on* a proposition, in the sense that (s)he stakes something on its being the case, and does not prepare him- or herself for the possibility that it is not the case (ibid., pp. 64–5). For Ginet, staking something on a proposition is a practical or

## II. Adequate Evidence

To characterize these cases, I rely on the following gradation of evidence for claims. At the top of the scale are those claims infallibly known to be true, either because (A1) their truth is made evident by the very fact of their being conceived, or (A2) conceiving them gives a person evidence to believe them that could never be overturned. I will not worry whether there really are any such claims. Next are (A3) those claims whose truth is, assuming normal background conditions, implied by or reliably correlated with a state of affairs given to an epistemic subject.<sup>6</sup> Let us call the quality of (A3) *conclusive evidence*.

The grade of evidentness to which I wish to draw special attention is *adequate evidence* (A4), holding of those propositions whose truth is, assuming normal background conditions, implied by or correlated with a state of affairs given to an epistemic subject, *but where there is an unresolved, open question about whether normal background conditions obtain*. Consider an example: a person identifies a bird he sees relatively clearly as an American goldfinch, but he has some reason to think that another similar bird might have flown into the area, contrary to its usual habits (due to global warming, say), and the birdwatcher has only weak evidence to believe that he could distinguish this other bird from the American goldfinch.<sup>7</sup>

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pragmatic matter, not a purely evidential matter. In some of Ginet's cases, it seems that pragmatic considerations, i.e., practical limitations on inquiry, are what the person has at stake — rather than practical reasons, i.e., reasons why it would be good to have the belief irrespective of its truth. Here I am borrowing some terminology deployed in David Owens 2000, Ch. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Here and in what follows, “given to an epistemic subject” is not meant to imply a foundationalist account of knowledge. For all I say here, what is given to the epistemic subject could include other beliefs, concepts, as well as experience, testimony, etc.

<sup>7</sup> The example is borrowed loosely from Austin 1961, 51. Completing our scale, we may say that grade (B) claims are those made only somewhat more likely by a state of affairs given to an epistemic subject. Grade (C) claims are

In cases like those we discussed in the first section, where there is adequate, but not conclusive, evidence for a proposition  $p$ , it can be rational either to believe  $p$ , or to suspend judgment about  $p$ . It is rationally permissible to believe  $p$ , because one is presented with a condition that under normal circumstances implies or correlates with  $p$ . However, the question has not been closed whether circumstances are normal. Hence it is also rationally permissible to suspend judgment about  $p$ . Our birdwatcher may rationally come to believe that this is a goldfinch, or he may rationally suspend judgment.

Intuitively, these are not cases of *equipollence* in which the evidence is perfectly balanced; nor are they cases of weak evidence which makes the claim only somewhat likely.<sup>8</sup> Instead, they have an ambivalent structure, in which one is pushed either to hold that conditions are normal and that the evidence has probative force, or to hold that conditions are abnormal. This is (by stipulation) not settled by facts currently available to the doxastic subject.

Some epistemologists may wish to close the question on behalf of the birdwatcher, without adding anything to the stock of evidence he possesses. On the one hand, they might say: “He surely ought to be skeptical, whenever a question relative to his ability to make bird-observation judgments has not been closed.” On the other hand, they might say: “He can be reasonably confident under the circumstances that he is seeing a goldfinch; hence it would be overly cautious to suspend judgment.” The nearly equal plausibility of these two reactions to the case ensures that neither is rationally required. Nor is this unique to the particular cases I have put forward. The definition of “adequate evidence” provides a general recipe for constructing

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*equipollent*: either there is no evidence for or against them, or the evidence for and against them is perfectly balanced.

<sup>8</sup> See n. 7.

such cases: take a case in which the evidence has decisive force if normal conditions obtain, and stipulate that the question of normal conditions obtaining has not been resolved.

Others may insist that the question of whether the birdwatcher should rationally believe, or suspend judgment, is closed by looking at pragmatic and contextual factors, such as what resources for inquiry are available to the birdwatcher, what he intends to *do* with the belief in question, and whether his judgment has been challenged in any way. For example, David Owens argues that, in principle, there is no limit to the amount of inquiry required in order to rule out skeptical hypotheses (2000, 55-6). However, there are practical limitations on inquiry, and for this reason a question can be closed due to pragmatic considerations inherent in the situation. The subject can legitimately come to believe a proposition on the basis of whatever evidence he has for it when inquiry is rightly closed. Despite the relevance of pragmatic factors in fixing the threshold of evidence, Owens claims that a subject always takes his beliefs to be based on conclusive grounds — not pragmatic considerations.<sup>9</sup>

However, it appears that we may fix the pragmatic factors in various ways, without eliminating the cases I have in mind. For example, we may stipulate that the birdwatcher has few additional resources for inquiry, he does not intend to do anything terribly important with the belief in question, and his doxastic state has not been challenged in any way by another person. Still, it seems, the question remains whether he ought to believe or suspend judgment, and either option seems reasonable.

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<sup>9</sup> Owens asks, “What makes it rational to think you have a conclusive ground [and therefore to believe]? Inconclusive evidence, of course, supplemented by a non-reflective awareness of the limitations on your cognitive resources” (2000, 50). As this answer suggests, Owens argues that pragmatic factors cannot be deployed as explicit reasons for believing or not believing, in cases such as the one I have considered (*ibid.*). I do not assume that they *can* be so deployed; instead I argue that even after they have been fixed, there is room for the will to operate in the

As I have explained, I think our epistemic intuitions are clearest when there is not much at stake practically. However, I still think we can amplify the practical consequences of the doxastic state without losing the intuitive sense that there are epistemic options. For example, suppose that just a moment ago I set, or attempted to set, a stopwatch to beep after I have been driving for twenty minutes. I did this just after I took a drug that will cause me to become very drowsy when it reaches my bloodstream, sometime just after the twenty-minute time period. However, the stopwatch accidentally slipped out of my hand and under the seat of the car, where, as it turns out, I cannot reach it without removing the seat entirely — something I don't have the tools to do. I will still be able to hear it if and when it goes off. At present, I have some doubts whether the stopwatch is still keeping time. I feel unable, by inspecting my memory, to rule out the possibility that I accidentally clicked the start button twice, starting and then stopping it. In short, the epistemic reasons I have for believing that the stopwatch is still keeping time are just the ordinary sort of reasons for believing, given standard conditions. But what has not been closed, for me, is the question whether standard conditions obtain. Therefore I have what I have called “adequate” reasons to believe, which also leave room for rationally permissible suspension of belief.

The view that no cases ever allow for multiple rationally permissible options flies in the face of ordinary belief attribution. Most people have no discomfort with the idea that situational factors, both evidential and practical, do not fully determine belief states by rational principles. There is a danger in thinking that in such matters we ought first to turn to epistemological theorists (*qua* theorists) to establish what intuitive phenomena stand in need of epistemological

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doxastic sphere. For a view in opposition to Owens, which holds that pragmatic factors may be explicit reasons, see Hookway 1999.



explanation. As in moral theory, ordinary people, even children, have an intuitive grasp of doxastic and epistemic phenomena even if they do not know how to theorize and describe them. This leaves open the possibility that we might later adopt a view that substantially departs from our intuitive epistemic judgments, with suitable justification. But if we do not use our intuitive judgments as a starting point for epistemological theory, we run the risk of having no genuine subject matter. Thus I propose that we take common intuitions about these cases seriously.

Let us then tentatively accept that there is a range of cases of belief based on what I have called adequate evidence, and say that in such cases there is more than one rationally permissible doxastic option. In such cases, belief, if it occurs, is based on epistemic reasons or evidence, but it is not rationally mandated by that evidence.

### **III. A Role for the Doxastic Will?**

In this section I will argue that cases of belief-formation based on adequate but not conclusive evidence meet some standard conditions on being able to will a thing *T* or bring it about voluntarily (where *T* is an event, an attitude, etc.). First, the agent's epistemic values — her caution in adopting new beliefs, or the importance she places on having definite beliefs — are expressed by her disposition to form one doxastic state rather than another (though it is, of course, possible that there is a gap between a person's stated epistemic values and her actual pattern of forming beliefs). Thus they satisfy a "self-expression" condition for voluntary *T*. Second, her attitudes are responsive to the relevant kind of reasons for *T*; thus she satisfies a "reason-responsiveness" condition on willed *T*. Finally, the agent has options other than *T*; thus she satisfies an "alternative possibilities" requirement on *T*. In this section, I will sketch these

three conditions on voluntarily bringing about *T* and make it plausible that my cases meet them. I do not intend here to offer a detailed defense of these conditions as genuine conditions on willed *T*, only to show that they are met in the cases I put forward.

**A. FIRST CONDITION (THE SELF-EXPRESSION CONDITION):** In order to bring about *T* voluntarily, it must be possible for *T* to be expressive of the agent's self. It might be thought that in order for a thing to count as being brought about voluntarily, it has to be possible for it to emerge from, and express, distinctive and stable aspects of an agent's self or person.<sup>10</sup> It would have to be possible for it to be *hers*, in that it expresses her personality or character, in at least some minimal sense.

One way this could be true — though not the only way — is for the willed thing to express a character trait. Virtue epistemologists and others have stressed the *indirect* ways in which epistemic character traits ground patterns of belief formation.<sup>11</sup> Beliefs are grounded in character traits in the sense that our dispositions to seek evidence (i.e., undertake inquiry), pay attention, and be independent- and open-minded all indirectly determine what beliefs we come to have. Also, our distinctive interests, and the particular role we play in shared practices of knowledge-acquisition (such as science), make a characteristic difference to what beliefs we come to have. But because these factors have only an indirect relationship to belief-formation, it

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<sup>10</sup> A stronger formulation, stating that in order to be voluntary *T* would *actually* have to express something about the agent's self, would be subject to the counterexample of voluntary behavior that is completely uncharacteristic of the agent and performed on the basis of an (uncharacteristic) whim.

<sup>11</sup> There is a long tradition of linking epistemic responsibility to character-traits on this indirect basis. Such a view can be traced to John Locke (1975); for a discussion, see Passmore 1980. Contemporary views along these lines can be found in, e.g., Clarke 1986, Heil 1983, Kornblith 1983, Reed 2001. Zagzebski labels this as "mild cognitive voluntarism" (1996, 63–6).

might be thought that beliefs do not *express* these character traits or distinctive features of one's self. Indeed, since beliefs are based on evidence, they appear to be passively obtained simply in virtue of one's rational faculties being appropriately tuned in to the world.

In the cases I have identified, however, there is a more direct connection between belief-formation and epistemic character. Belief-formation, in cases where there is adequate evidence, can express the character trait(s) of trustfulness, conviction, confidence, and assuredness; suspension of belief in such cases can express the character trait(s) of wariness, skepticism, and distrust. The traits are plainly epistemic: they have to do with doxastic states, and not in the first instance with moral or action-directed states. Take the example of wariness. My wariness expresses itself directly in my tendency not to believe unusual claims or those claims presented by people unfamiliar to me. There is no additional mediating step between the wariness and the associated pattern or disposition of belief-formation. In particular it is not mediated by action or practical reasons. Yet it is a genuine character trait, like shyness, courage, or kindness.

Epistemic character traits are not employed as *reasons* for belief. This is the same as in the case of non-epistemic character-traits. I do not reason, "The evidence is such that it is optional for me to believe or to suspend judgment; I am a wary person, so I will suspend judgment." Similarly, in cases of action, I do not normally invoke character-traits (such as a hedonistic bent) as *justifications* for my action, although I sometimes use them to explain how I act. This is because the justificatory reason for my action (if I am a hedonist) is the pleasurable quality of the thing I reach for, not my hedonism *per se*. Similarly, if I am a wary person, it is the fact that *the question remains open whether conditions are normal* that provides a reason for me

to suspend judgment. I do not directly employ my wariness as a justificatory reason to suspend judgment.

Some have argued that the expression of epistemic character traits is only plausible when there are multiple rationally permissible options. Joseph Raz writes that “When we believe a proposition or withhold belief because not to believe, or not to withhold belief, would be irrational, all that is shown of our character (barring special circumstances) is that we are normal rational persons. But whether or not we believe something when neither belief nor withholding it would be irrational can show us to be suspicious, indecisive, envious, trusting, naive, and so on” (9). Thus on Raz’s view, patterns of belief-formation normally only express character-traits when they go beyond what is required by the evidence.

Cases in which there is rational latitude among doxastic options do provide a context for displaying certain epistemic character traits. However, it is hardly the only context where this is true. Another context is that in which a person comes to believe something even when the normal response would be to bypass or disobey reason. For example, when believing something would be personally devastating, and where the typical human reaction would be a denial-response, say, then believing in accordance with reason does appear to display an epistemic character trait of strength. There also appear to be cases in which the normal response to a certain body of evidence would be to make a commonplace fallacy. In such cases, adherence to what is epistemically required does seem to show something (good) about the epistemic character of the subject. (Perhaps these are the “special circumstances” that Raz mentions.) However, it is notable that the character traits on display in such cases are of a different kind than those we have considered. When a person adheres to rational epistemic standards contrary to typical

human nature, it shows even-mindedness, open-mindedness, honesty, or even courage. These are all epistemic virtues. By contrast, the character-traits displayed in cases where there is rational latitude are neither good nor bad in themselves, though we can imagine them being good or bad in the pursuit of certain ends.

**B. SECOND CONDITION (THE REASON-RESPONSIVENESS CONDITION): In order to bring about *T* voluntarily, the subject must be reason-responsive with respect to *T*.** It is plausible to hold that, to bring about *T* voluntarily, a subject must recognize some significant subset of the reasons there are for doing *T*, or for one or more alternatives to *T*, to the extent that there are any such reasons. Consider underpaying one's taxes. In order to count as underpaying one's taxes voluntarily, a person must count the following sorts of considerations as relevant to the question of what to do: the law requires taxes to be filed; genuine documents must be available to back up one's tax claims; the tax service occasionally audits tax claims; by underreporting income one pays less; etc. If one is completely ignorant of the relation between reported income and tax, then one cannot count as voluntarily underreporting income to avoid taxes.

Some hold the additional view that actions that are based on no reasons at all are also not voluntary (setting aside "Buridan's" cases in which arbitrary choice is required by powerful reasons). For example, if a person has an outburst for no reason at all, then she cannot count as acting voluntarily.<sup>12</sup> Of course doing something for "no reason at all" is unusual. The idea appears paradoxical: to the extent that we cannot identify *any* reason for the would-be action,

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<sup>12</sup> This example is from Frankfurt 1988, 63. Cited in Raz, p. 6. Frankfurt has been criticized on the ground that actions done on a whim appear to be voluntary (Shoemaker 2006). This is a challenge to the whole notion of reason-responsiveness as a condition of willed T, but as such, it does not threaten my aims in this paper.

then it appears that it doesn't even count as behavior, much less action.<sup>13</sup> Usually it turns out that there is some reason after all, and depending on the degree to which it can be thought of as a reason for action by the person herself, it assumes the aspect of an action. On the view in question, if it turns out that the sudden outburst is in fact a subconscious reaction to a subtle insult, then we judge its voluntariness by the extent to which this flows from the character of the person, or can be thought of *by her* as a reason. To the extent that the subtle insult can be grasped and accepted by the person as a reason for her outburst, it comes to seem voluntary, assuming other conditions on voluntariness are met.<sup>14</sup>

These considerations demonstrate the importance of reason-responsiveness to voluntariness, but they leave open what level of exactitude in the grasp of reasons is required in order for a person to count as bringing about *T* voluntarily. In order to be plausible, this condition on voluntary *T* must be relatively weak. To count as bringing about *T* voluntarily, a person need not be able to articulate or identify all the reasons to which she is responding, nor need she be able to identify all the important reasons there are. It is enough, for voluntary *T*, that she respond to the relevant reasons she takes there to be for *T*, and that she respond to at least some of the reasons there actually are for *T*.

Belief-formation in the cases I have discussed is highly reason-responsive: at least as much so as normal cases of voluntary action (cf. Raz 1999, 15). One might worry that belief-

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<sup>13</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse proposes that there are many kinds of emotionally-motivated counterexamples to the claim that voluntary actions must be based on reasons e.g., throwing a tin opener on the ground out of anger (1991, 58). In these counterexamples, there is no sensible rationale that the agent would avow for her behavior. This type of case does not strictly bear on the Reason-Responsiveness Condition, since this condition only requires that one recognize some significant subset of the reasons there are for doing *T*, or for one or more alternatives to *T*, not that *T* is actually based on those actions. For discussion, see Mele 2003, 71–76.

<sup>14</sup> I do not regard actions purposely done against the available reasons, to be based on no reason at all.

formation in these cases is not wholly dictated by the reasons there are — since there are rationally permissible alternatives — and hence that the epistemic subject is not reason-responsive. But the subject is attuned to the epistemic situation at least as much as practical agents are attuned to practical circumstances in normal cases of voluntary action. Consider practical situations in which the agent-independent practical reasons do not fully dictate what an agent must do, and her own distinctive practical preferences and interests enter the picture in order to complete the justification and explanation why she acts as she does. For example, objective reasons might not dictate that I *must* offer to help another person carry a heavy stack of books, when it is of some cost to me. Hence it is partly up to me, according to my preferences, to decide what to do, and this in no way undermines the voluntariness of my action. We normally accept that there are agent-relative reasons for performing actions within the domain of several options each of which is, apart from those agent-relative reasons, rationally permissible. The fact that subjective preferences and dispositions sometimes play a role in the justification and explanation of practical agency is not thought to undermine reason-responsiveness or, by extension, to render such actions involuntary. The same holds true of epistemic agency.

There is a more pressing issue. Some philosophers appear to have supposed that what is required for willed belief is responsiveness to *practical* reasons. This is sometimes expressed as a strong negation of the relevance of epistemic, evidential, or truth-based reasons to voluntary belief: Bernard Williams claims that in order to will a belief, I must be able to bring it about “irrespective of truth” (148); or as Barbara Winters puts the point, the “necessary condition is that the belief be acquired independently of any *consideration of its truth*” (244; italics added). This appears to be the source of the view that one must be a pragmatist in order to be a doxastic

voluntarist. Since I do not wish to claim that belief-formation is directly responsive to practical reasons in normal cases, it is important to see what is wrong with the requirement that it would have to be based on practical reasons in order to count as voluntary. It would be wrong because it begs the question against a view that identifies the relevant reasons for doxastic agency as epistemic reasons. It would be obviously question-begging to say, for example, that in order for belief-formation to be voluntary it would have to be an action. But this is scarcely a different claim from the claim that a belief must be directly responsive to practical reasons in order to be voluntary. Therefore, on its face this seems the wrong way to frame a general condition on voluntarily bringing something about.

**C. THIRD CONDITION (THE SUBJECTIVE OPTIONS CONDITION): In order to bring about *T* voluntarily, a subject must be able to be aware of options other than *T*.** Take an instance where *T* is an action. Suppose I am in a situation such that, if I attempt to do anything other than *T*, I will receive an electric shock that knocks me unconscious — and I know this. In that case, one might say, I cannot perform *T* voluntarily. This is because the “subjective” availability of options — i.e., my ability to *know* that I have options — is being taken as a necessary condition on my bringing about *T* voluntarily. The cases of “adequate evidence” we have been considering are cases where there are subjectively available doxastic options. For example, if I come to believe my roommate’s testimony that there is a three-foot lizard in the driveway, I can recognize at the same time that this is not the only reasonable doxastic reaction. Others similarly situated might reasonably suspend judgment, and it is open to me to recognize this fact.



I said at the outset of the paper that my view is distinctive because it takes evidentialism seriously as a threat to voluntary belief. Now I am in a position to say *how* evidentialism limits voluntary belief: it does so by way of the Subjective Options Condition. In cases of conclusive evidence, the alternatives to belief do not count as *doxastic* options. There is only one reasonable doxastic response. This rules out reasonably thinking that there are other options; in addition, I am normally in a position to know this. Suppose a woman clearly sees a dog running toward her under normal conditions of observation, and suppose that, in such circumstances, the only reasonable response is for her to believe that there is a dog running toward her.<sup>15</sup> By hypothesis, any reasonable person acquainted with the evidence must adopt the belief. If she were to purport not to form the belief, it would discredit her as a believer — as opposed to a fantasist or a wishful thinker. It is only insofar as she is confused or mistaken that she can think of herself as being entitled to suspend judgment. This confusion does not have to do with a lack of access to evidence: by hypothesis, all the evidence is available to her, and it warrants only one reasonable doxastic response. In other words, despite the fact that she would be acquainted with rationally compulsory evidence that a dog is running toward her, she would purport not to have the belief that there is a dog running toward her. Under the circumstances, she cannot, as a *doxastic* agent, suspend belief, and she knows this. Still less can she believe that there is *no* dog running toward her. Hence, on this matter, she has only one doxastic option. And in that case, belief is not a matter of her will, for she cannot do otherwise, in a strong sense. This has an implication, of course, for one's subjective state: a person cannot reasonably be aware of having doxastic options if she doesn't have them. Thus conclusive evidence rules out voluntary belief.

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<sup>15</sup> A variation on the “collie” case in Adler 2002, 55.

Action and belief are crucially dissimilar here. Suppose I am offered ten dollars as an inducement to torture somebody.<sup>16</sup> Assume that I have no particular reason to commit this act of torture, that I have some overwhelming reasons not to commit it, and that ten dollars is an insignificant sum of money to me; therefore, it is not rationally permissible to accept the offer. Still, my refusal of the offer is fully voluntary, in whatever sense we wish to give this notion. In this case, if I accept the money, doing so can still be an action, even if I acknowledge that it violates what is rationally mandatory. An action done contrary to the available, relevant reasons is nevertheless an action.

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The notion of voluntariness captured by the three conditions considered above is broader than that marked out by the concepts of choice, decision, and intention. This answers to ordinary ways of speaking. Intuitively, animals and very young children act voluntarily, but though they do not choose or decide how to act in a full-blooded sense. Moreover, although I cannot wake up from a deep sleep intentionally (assuming I have not made any prior arrangements such as setting an alarm), it seems that I can do so voluntarily. There are also cases in which my bodily movements cannot be intentional, but seem nonetheless to be voluntary: I raise my arm suddenly, without the time to think about it, to block a thrown object from hitting my head. Thus Anscombe observes that some physical movements are called voluntary but not intentional when the agent is unaware of the reasons for performing them, or when he has no reasons for

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<sup>16</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984): 133–4. Dennett’s original case illustrates a claim about psychological indeterminacy: there are cases where, psychologically, I am not able to do otherwise than what I do, and yet I can act freely (and voluntarily) — in some suitably defensible sense of “free” and “voluntary.” Here, the case is meant to illustrate a claim about rational indeterminacy: there are cases where I am not able rationally to do otherwise than what I do (and I recognize this), and yet I can act voluntarily.

performing them (Anscombe 2000 [1957], 89–90). Behavior that is welcomed, accepted, or even merely foreseen as a concomitant of one’s actions can also be voluntary but not intentional, as, for example, when one intends to go to the grocery store by the fastest route and in so doing passes through a park one likes to traverse; or again, when one intends to perform an eye exam and in so doing causes displeasure by shining a bright light in the eye (ibid.). Still, all these voluntary behaviors arguably meet the three conditions sketched above. This suggests that (a) the voluntary extends beyond the intentional, and (b) the voluntary has a less direct connection with deliberation and explicit reasoning than the intentional. Suppose we say that the will is just what underlies the voluntary. In that case, although it might be awkward to say that a person chooses, decides, or intends to believe something on the basis of adequate reasons that she already has in her possession, this would not imply that the will has no role in the doxastic sphere.<sup>17</sup>

#### **IV. The Inconsistency Objection**

It might be objected by some evidentialists that the cases I have put forward depend on an inconsistency in thinking. In order to regard herself as having doxastic options, the subject must hold both that the evidence provides sufficient support for a particular belief, and also that it would be rational to suspend judgment about that belief. Therefore the evidence both does and does not provide sufficient support for a given belief.

The claim of inconsistency is motivated by a necessary correlation between belief-states and evidential strength: as Jonathan Adler articulates the correlation, for every degree or strength

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<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting that intentions themselves are not subject to the will in the way that actions are. On this point, see Kavka 1983.

of a belief-like doxastic state, there is a corresponding judgment of the strength of the evidence (*Belief's Own Ethics*, 41). The strongest doxastic state — full belief — requires, by necessity, a judgment that the evidence is conclusive. To the extent that a doxastic agent grasps this necessary truth, it is not possible for her fully to believe  $p$  and also to hold that it is rationally permissible to suspend judgment about  $p$ . Her state of full belief commits her to a judgment that there is conclusive evidence. Hence suspension of judgment is irrational.

In response to this objection, I wish to draw on a plausible distinction that Adler himself makes between belief and confidence. As Adler says, “One can be entitled to a full belief without having unqualified confidence in that belief, and so it is possible for reasons to diminish confidence without undermining one’s belief” (250). Adler gives the following example: “You recall (believe) that two acquaintances of yours Dean and John met in a conference in Colorado in the 1970s. You are told, and you come to believe, that John, who is British, rarely left the United Kingdom, and as a result you start to have doubts about your belief” (249). According to Adler, the reasons you have to doubt that Dean and John met in Colorado do not undermine your belief, only your confidence in that belief. With a few details filled in, this case is obviously similar to the cases of adequate evidence I considered earlier. We may suppose, as Adler seems to, that whatever my evidence is for believing that Dean and John met in Colorado has sufficient probative value to warrant belief assuming normal background conditions. But at the same time, a question has been opened whether normal background conditions actually obtain. Adler introduces the distinction between belief and confidence as a way of maintaining the centrality of full belief to his strict form of evidentialism. It is possible to maintain a full belief that  $p$  in the

face of doubts about  $p$ , rather than reducing one's level of belief to partial belief, because doubts do not trade directly against belief.

This seems plausible — and, it can be used as a response to the Inconsistency Objection. Confidence has an affective character: it implies a feeling of security. Doubt is to be understood here as insecurity, or the lack of felt confidence. But doubt isn't merely the lack of felt confidence: it also appears to imply a judgment about the epistemic situation. A plausible candidate for the content of this judgment is that it would be reasonable to suspend full belief. If it is possible to believe and at the same time have doubts, as Adler concedes, then it also appears possible to believe while judging that it would be reasonable for somebody to suspend belief.

It is perhaps helpful again to consider the parallel with practical reasoning. It is not inconsistent to reason thus: I judge that I have most reason to do  $\phi$ , but I think it would also be reasonable to suspend judgment and postpone or omit doing  $\phi$ . Suppose that in this case time constraints are not part of one's reasons for doing  $\phi$ . There is, in such a case, nothing inconsistent in allowing for the possibility of multiple rationally permissible options, even while supposing that the reasons best support one particular option.

## **V. Counter-Normativity and the Will**

I now consider and respond to an objection put forward by Gary Watson. Watson is sympathetic to the idea that there is room for agency in the realm of belief (Watson 2004, 149). On his view, control over belief is not undermined by the fact that beliefs are determined in accordance with evidence, rather than in accordance with convenience, desire, or moral reasons. Watson argues that we *lose* control, within the normative domain of belief, to the extent that we

do not respond to the evidence in light of epistemic norms. When we respond to evidence, we *gain* control in that domain (144). It only goes a bit beyond Watson's stated view to say that belief *is* a basic action of a doxastic kind, performed on the basis of constitutive *epistemic* reasons. (Watson speaks of doxastic agency, but not of doxastic actions.)

However, Watson holds that the aims of theoretical rationality are not served by the operation of the will in the sphere of belief. Some of the characteristic things we expect the will to *explain* have no place in the domain of belief (149). First, instances of counternormative agency, including weakness of will or akrasia, acting for the sake of the bad, and failure of motivation through depression or emotional paralysis, have no place in the realm of belief. This is because "one can believe only under the guise of truth" (148): there is no gap between judgment about what is true, or conclusively supported by the evidence, and what one believes. Indeed, one never believes a claim *P* without undertaking some commitment to the truth of *P*, and even to the existence of adequate evidence for *P*.

The position I have sketched raises the prospect of a different kind of doxastic akrasia than those commonly discussed in the philosophical literature. Doxastic akrasia is a condition in which an agent chooses or finds herself moved towards a doxastic option she regards as less epistemically rational over one she regards as more epistemically rational. In the cases I have put forward, there are at least two doxastic options, each of which is epistemically rational. For example, in the stopwatch case from earlier, I would be (epistemically) rational to accept the normal force of my memory of setting the stopwatch in the normal way, and I would also be (epistemically) rational to suspend judgment. Both options are supported by epistemic reasons. It may therefore appear that there is no room here for saying I can regard one of the options as

epistemically better than the other, unless I am mistaken about their relative strength. Hence there is no possibility of acting against what I regard as the better-supported option.

Most philosophers who have discussed doxastic akrasia have focused on very different sorts of cases, in which a person feels drawn toward believing something she feels is *not* epistemically rational, and in which the reason she is drawn toward believing it is some powerful non-epistemic source of motivation within her, such as a desire not to destroy a relationship with somebody. For example, a standard case is one in which a person is strongly drawn to believe that her spouse is faithful, despite strong evidence to the contrary. Hookway discusses a case where there are powerful non-epistemic motives at work: “Consider a mother who believes that her son is innocent of some particularly heinous crime of which he has been accused. For epistemic *akrasia* to be possible, she must intend her belief to be fixed by the balance of the evidence ... and her state must have a normative component that renders her belief inconsistent with this intention ... [e.g.,] The evidence supporting her son’s innocence is slight ... The evidence available to her is too limited to support a judgment either way ... [or] There are strong or conclusive reasons to believe in her son’s guilt” (2001, 185).

There appears to be room for doxastic self-control, and hence something like an exercise of the will in Watson’s own sense, in these cases. Watson describes weakness of will as a condition in which “normal” capacities of self-control have been culpably undeveloped in an agent (2004, 52–7). This leaves open what would count as a normal exercise of self-control. There are many forms of self-control that cannot neatly be classified either as direct exercises of the will or as self-manipulation. Similar techniques of self-control can be applied both in practical and in doxastic matters. Alfred R. Mele considers a familiar example in which a man,

Sam, continues to believe that his wife, Sally, is not seeing another man even though he thinks it would be better to suspend judgment about the matter. Mele notes several forms of “motivated epistemic bias” such as confirmation bias and selective attention that are amenable to mental self-control in such a case: “Recognizing that his desire that Sally not be having an affair may incline him to self-deception, [Sam] may set himself to be on his guard against motivated biasing. He may commit himself to assessing the evidence from a variety of perspectives, including one that treats the case as a purely hypothetical matter designed to test his skills as a detective” (Mele 1995, 98). What is important here is that this form of self-control is analogous to ordinary forms of self-control in the practical sphere, in which a person “cognitively transforms” an object of strong desire, for example by focusing on some properties of it and not others (*ibid.*, 46–7). Mele reports an experimental result in which “Children who ‘cognitively transformed’ such edible rewards as pretzels and marshmallows into brown logs and white clouds delayed gratification much longer than did children instructed to focus their attention on arousing features of their rewards (e.g., their taste)” (*ibid.*, 46). We are familiar with forms of practical self-control involving differently attending to objects. Mele’s point is that these are normal forms of “enkratic” self-control, involving the overcoming of strong counterrational desires, and in addition, that self-control in the domain of belief is not so different. Hence, given Watson’s own account of weakness of will, we should consider it plausible that there *is* doxastic weakness of will.

However, this is not precisely the sort of weakness of will that is in question on my account. The question, for my account, is whether we can make sense of counternormative doxastic willing between two options *both of which are epistemically permissible*. Consider



what such a case would be like. Suppose I have a practical goal that is served by my having a certain doxastic personality or style: for example, I would like to sell cars to people, and it is more conducive to selling cars if I come across as a confident believer in their good qualities. However, my own doxastic nature tends toward skepticism and hesitancy. In that case, confining ourselves to cases in which belief and suspension of judgment are both epistemically permissible, we might imagine that while I think I have reason to believe that the cars I wish to sell are good cars, I have a hard time actually bringing myself to *believe* this: my tendency is to suspend judgment about the matter. Strength of will, in this case, would be shown by dwelling on the evidence that *ex hypothesi* adequately supports the belief that the cars are good, rather than on the open questions that make it possible that this evidence does not have its normal probative force. This attentional “dwelling on” the positive aspects of the evidence is like the attentional transformations discussed above.

We need not suppose that there is a powerful extrinsic practical goal in the wings, in order to make sense of this idea. Someone might have the scientific goal to have beliefs about a scientifically important object of inquiry. A philosopher might have an interest in being conservative in what evidence she accepts, so that she may have a comprehensive knowledge of only the most certain truths. And yet the scientist, or the philosopher, might have a hard time reaching these goals, and require attentional and imaginative work in order to achieve them. Doxastic weakness of will is here characterized, not in the usual way, as an inability to believe what the evidence conclusively supports, or a tendency to believe what is psychologically protective or rewarding. It is a difficulty in arriving at that doxastic option which, whether for practical or inquiry-based reasons, I have most reason to arrive at, when there are other

epistemically permissible options. Crucially, practical or inquiry-based motives are operating here as reasons to select among permissible alternatives, not as they have been supposed to operate in traditional pragmatism, as purely practical considerations that are more fundamental than evidence or argument and can in principle bypass them.

Let us, then, return to the main thread of the argument. Watson is concerned, not just that there is no room for doxastic weakness (and strength) of will, but also that there is no legitimate *executive* function for the doxastic will. In the practical domain, it is sometimes said that a person's will is needed in order to bring a person to act in the absence of conclusive reasons. Ann might have equal reason to buy a ticket to see either one of two different films showing at the same time. Practical reason, and therefore judgment, cannot provide total guidance; but her *will* can determine her to buy a ticket for one of the two films, executing action in a situation where reason gives out.

There are apparently similar cases to that of the movie ticket in the doxastic domain, but Watson argues that they are in an important respect dissimilar. For example, suppose the evidence equally supports the judgment that Donald has copied the idea for his novel from Henry James, and that he has not. According to Watson, I might, without paradox, form a belief that Donald has not copied James. However, according to Watson, "a fundamental disanalogy remains. Intending and acting in the face of uncertainty or indeterminacy can serve the ends of practical reason. But believing (as distinct from some weaker form of acceptance) on insufficient evidence cannot serve the ends of theoretical reason. [In such cases] doxastic commitment is merely an instrumentally valuable result of the operation of practical reason, rather than a cognitive form of the will" (Watson 2004, 149). Elsewhere, Watson identifies the "ultimate end"

of theoretical reason as true belief (127). This suggests an interpretation of his claim (in the quote just before) that “believing on insufficient evidence cannot serve the ends of theoretical reason” (*op cit.*). Believing on insufficient evidence does not serve the end of acquiring true beliefs, and avoiding false beliefs. It is important to add “avoiding false beliefs” because only in that way can we say that a person who tries to believe a *lot* of things in order to capture as many true beliefs as possible, is not fully serving the ends of theoretical reason.

The cases of voluntary belief I have set forward are importantly different from these cases. As in Watson’s cases, there is rational latitude; but in the cases I have put forward, the available warrant for the belief is as good a warrant as we normally expect: e.g., perceptual or testimonial. It provides conclusive evidence when normal conditions obtain. What is in question is *whether* the warrant holds in the normal way: reasonable people can disagree about whether it does. Therefore, it is not at all clear that the attitude of belief or suspension of belief adopted in such situations does not serve the ends of theoretical reason. The person who believes is free to regard the evidence as adequate or even conclusive; the person who does not believe, as inadequate or inconclusive. Either way, the ends of theoretical reason, of believing truth and not believing falsity, can be reflectively maintained by the person holding either attitude.

The claim that the doxastic will would not serve the ends of theoretical reason does not take account of the fact that the ends of theoretical reason are multiple. At any rate, the *end* of theoretical reason, if there is only one, has different aspects that may be emphasized one over the other. As William James famously writes, among the “forced options” in the domain of belief lies a choice between the two principles “Believe truth” and “Shun error” (James 1956, 17–18). Compare hedonism: “Seek pleasure” and “Avoid pain” are both proper aims of the hedonist, but

taken in different ratios urge utterly different behavior. On my view, unlike James's, these two epistemic directives need not be given their ultimate interpretation in terms of practical goals. We may take them at face value. Truth-seeking and error-avoidance, though both properly doxastic aims, urge different patterns of belief.<sup>18</sup> Both are fundamental grounds of doxastic agency.<sup>19</sup>

## VI. Concluding Remarks

I have not said much about the scope of doxastic voluntarism. My main aim is to establish the intuitive plausibility of the view that there are some instances of doxastic willing, and defend that view against prevalent objections. But for all I have said here, we are often not in voluntary control of our beliefs, for in many cases there may be only one reasonable option. When I see a dog race toward me, I do not feel free to believe that there is no dog (or no animal) racing toward me, nor do I feel free to suspend judgment. It seems I come to believe it regardless of my doxastic character traits, because there is, at the end of the day, only one doxastic option.

However, this may be a hyperconservative assessment of the scope of voluntarism. Whether people can have a voluntary belief that a dog is running toward them in uncontroversially normal conditions will depend on whether withholding judgment is a reasonable alternative in such cases. If, in ordinary circumstances, skepticism were a reasonable alternative to ordinary empirical belief, the feeling of unfreedom in such cases would be illusory,

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<sup>18</sup> Some philosophers have tried to reconcile the dual aims in a single univocal principle. See David 2001, p. 158.

<sup>19</sup> David Owens argues that belief must have a plurality of aims in order to make sense of the idea of control in the sphere of belief (Owens 2002). However, it is not necessary to show that *belief* aims at either truth or the avoidance of error, in order to make sense of doxastic control; it is only necessary to show that *theoretical reason generally* has these two aims. One serves these aims by believing *or* by suspending judgment.

and the domain of voluntary belief much greater. Such a view would have one consequence worth noting here preliminarily: it would render ordinary empirical belief voluntary.<sup>20</sup>

If empirical belief is in principle voluntary — as it might be, for example, on Descartes’ official view — this would open a new avenue for the application of epistemically normative judgments to belief.<sup>21</sup> Writers on belief have often struggled with the question of the “normativity” of epistemic judgment. Some doxastic involuntarists have insisted that it is appropriate to apply evaluative judgments to aspects of a person that are not under her control.<sup>22</sup> Others have argued for a “norm-expressivist” theory of belief according to which believing expresses a norm for truth.<sup>23</sup> On my view, the normativity of epistemic judgment can have a (partial) basis in the control an agent exercises among her doxastic options.

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<sup>20</sup> Brian Ribiero (2002) argues that if skepticism is unanswerable, this implies a loss of rational self-control. However, he is thinking of the situation in which I *continue to have empirical beliefs* even when skeptical arguments have shown those beliefs to be unwarranted. I am instead imagining a form of skepticism that renders suspension of judgment rationally permissible, but not rationally mandatory.

<sup>21</sup> On Descartes’ voluntarism, see Plantinga 1993, 23. As Plantinga recognizes, the attribution is complicated. See Descartes 1984, 40 [AT 57–8]. For interpretations of Descartes’ voluntarism see Newman 2007; Curley 1975.

<sup>22</sup> Montmarquet 1992; Owens 2000; Adler 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Shah and Velleman 2005.

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