

Taking Aim at the Truth

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1. Introduction

It is widely agreed that one cannot form beliefs at will. For instance, one cannot simply at will form the belief that the Moon is made of blue cheese in the way that one can at will raise one's right arm. Why is it that one cannot form beliefs at will? What features does belief formation have such that having those features explains why beliefs cannot be formed at will? This paper will propose that belief formation is a process that involves taking aim at the truth because if belief formation has this feature, it will explain why beliefs cannot be formed at will better than alternative explanations in the literature. The argument of this paper, thus, takes the form of an inference to the best explanation.

The notion of taking aim that this proposal exploits will be explained in more detail later but here is a brief characterization of what it is meant to capture. Consider the difference between someone who takes aim at his target and

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someone who shoots randomly into a crowd in the hope of hitting his target. Whatever characterizes the former in contrast with the latter is meant by ‘taking aim’ in this paper. The characterization can be arrived at by inspection of certain cases of actions. Once we have a sufficiently robust understanding of taking aim, we can appeal to the hypothesis that belief formation takes aim at the truth as the best explanation of why beliefs cannot be formed at will.

2. Preliminaries

This paper will go along with those who hold that beliefs cannot be formed at will. This assumption will not be defended in depth but some of the points noted by dissenters, in particular Steup (2000) and Ryan (2003), will be addressed in the course of the discussion. However, there is one important concern that appears to generate resistance to the view that beliefs cannot be formed at will which needs to be addressed before launching the main discussion.

The question whether beliefs can be formed at will often comes up in connection with the issue of how to conceptualize epistemic justification.¹ If, as seems intuitive to many, an epistemic agent can be held responsible for her beliefs, and if one wants to model epistemic responsibility on moral responsibility, it might seem that it must be possible to form beliefs at will. If one cannot form beliefs at will, what one believes is not under one’s control and it seems obvious that one can only be responsible for what is under one’s control. To claim that beliefs cannot be formed at will may then seem to lead to the conclusion that epistemic agents are not responsible for their beliefs and that we therefore cannot understand epistemic justification in deontological terms.

However, the claim that beliefs cannot be formed at will is not in obvious

¹Alston (1988) is a typical example.

conflict with a deontological conception of epistemic justification. First, it is debatable whether an agent's being able to form beliefs at will is sufficient for her to be responsible for the beliefs she forms. If you sign a document because the Godfather has his gun against your head and you reasonably conclude that the most prudent course of action is to do his bidding, you are signing the document at will—you decide to sign and your decision leads to your signing just as in those cases where you are under no threat. So you sign the document at will. But whether you are also morally responsible for signing the document is not so clear cut. Some hold that depending on the credibility of the threat and other possible factors, you might not be responsible for signing the document. Others will take a tougher line and hold that you are responsible though perhaps not blameworthy. Which view of moral responsibility is correct is not relevant for present purposes. The important point to notice is that there evidently is room for debate whether you are, in the circumstances described, also responsible for signing the document. The mere fact that you are signing at will may or may not be sufficient for your being morally responsible. The views presented in this paper are silent on this further issue. The same goes for beliefs and epistemic responsibility.

Secondly, and more importantly, being able to form beliefs at will is not obviously necessary for responsibility for one's beliefs. Suppose one goes about answering a question whether p . First, one does many things to gather evidence: read the newspapers, consult an encyclopedia, ask experts, etc. Once the evidence is in, one forms a belief in response to the evidence. It is this last step that is at issue when it is asked whether beliefs can be formed at will. If this last step is not at will, would that mean that one cannot be held responsible for the belief held? It is not obvious what the answer should be.

Consider the case of Sirhan Sirhan's killing Robert Kennedy. There are many things that Sirhan did before pulling the trigger: obtain a gun, go to the

Ambassador Hotel, approach Robert Kennedy, etc. These are all things that intuitively were under Sirhan's control. But once he pulled the trigger, events left his control. It took nearly 26 hours until Kennedy died after being shot and many things, none of which were in any reasonable sense under Sirhan's control, must have contributed to Kennedy's death. Once he pulls the trigger, he loses control over the further course of events that constitute his killing Kennedy. But surely Sirhan is morally responsible for Kennedy's death. He is not merely responsible for pulling the trigger which had the unfortunate consequence of Kennedy's death. If this is right, why should it not be possible to hold someone epistemically responsible for believing that p even though the belief is the result of a sequence of events that are not under her control; i.e. even though she cannot form the belief at will?

What are the conditions that make Sirhan morally responsible for the death of Robert Kennedy? An answer to this question is needed before the issue whether one can be held responsible for one's beliefs can be settled. Merely noting that beliefs cannot be formed at will is insufficient to show that a deontological conception of epistemic justification is untenable.

Nothing that is said in this paper is meant to settle the vexed issue of how to conceptualize epistemic justification: as far as this paper is concerned, Steup (2000) and Ryan (2003) might be right that an agent is responsible for her beliefs. They might also be right that belief formation is *voluntary*. It is very natural to say that Sirhan voluntarily killed Kennedy even though his killing Kennedy is in part constituted by events that are not under his control. So it might be that belief formation is voluntary even though it is not at will. Of course, whether beliefs really are voluntary even though they cannot be formed at will depends on what counts as voluntary. Again, nothing in this paper addresses this question.

3. Forming beliefs at will

When an agent S performs *at will* an action φ , S must possess the intention to φ which causes her to φ .² But further restrictions on the way of causing S to φ are needed. For instance, a man at a party intends to spill what is in his glass to signal to his confederates to begin a robbery but this intention makes him nervous which causes his hands to shake which leads to his spilling what is in his glass (Frankfurt 1988, 70). In such a case the man did not spill his glass at will even though his intention to spill caused him to spill. As Scott-Kakures puts it, if S performs φ at will, the intention to φ must cause S's φ -ing 'in a way appropriate for intentional action' (1994, 78). It is notoriously difficult to specify what the *appropriate way for intentional action* is. However, for present purposes it is sufficient to rely on the commonly held view that what is needed is some kind of guidance and control by the intention to φ .³

Thus, the issue whether or not beliefs can be formed at will is not simply whether an intention to form the belief that p can cause the formation of the belief that p . An intention can easily cause the formation of a belief. Someone who is convinced by Pascal's wager might form the intention to form the belief that God exists and proceed to manipulate his circumstances—go to church on a regular basis, immerse himself in religious writing, etc.—so as to make himself believe that God exists. This would be a case in which an intention to form the belief that p causes the formation of the belief that p but it is not a case of forming a belief at will.

Similarly, in bringing about a state of affairs, one also brings it about that

²Usually, the intention to φ will be acquired through experience but it is perhaps possible to have intentions in an a priori manner as, say, a requirement for being an intentional agent at all. Thanks to Dion Scott-Kakures for pointing out the possibility of a priori intentions.

³For a sampling of arguments in support of this, see Bishop (1989, ch. 5), Brand (1984), Mele (1992, ch. 10), Mossel (2005), Searle (1983, ch. 3).

one forms the belief that the state of affairs obtains—e.g. when Lavinia turns on the lights in the office, she also forms the belief that the lights are on. So one can control whether or not one forms the belief that p in cases in which one can control whether or not p (Feldman 2000, 671–2). But this is not a case of forming at will the belief that p , either. The fact that one can bring it about that one forms the belief that p by bringing it about at will that p does not mean one can form at will the belief that p .⁴

Forming the belief that p at will must be a case in which the agent’s intending to form the belief that p makes her form the belief that p *in a way that is appropriate for intentional action*. This is what is said to be impossible when it is said that one cannot form beliefs at will. How can this be explained? The following section will briefly discuss two attempts and their shortcomings.

4. Two attempts at explaining the impossibility of forming beliefs at will

One explanation of the impossibility of forming beliefs at will, typified by O’Shaughnessy (1980) and Williams (1973), goes along the following lines:

An agent does not count as forming beliefs unless she is aiming to form a belief with a content proposition that is true; however, if she simply decides to believe an arbitrarily chosen proposition, she cannot be aiming to form a belief with a content that is true; that is, she cannot be forming a *belief* at all; therefore, one cannot form at will beliefs that p for arbitrary propositions. So one cannot form beliefs at will.

This explanation fails because the fact that one cannot form at will the belief that p for *arbitrary* p does not entail that one cannot at will form the belief

⁴Similar points are made by Bennett (1990), Buckareff (2006), O’Shaughnessy (1980), Winters (1979), Scott-Kakures (1994).

that p for *any* p . There is nothing incoherent in holding that one cannot at will form the belief that p for arbitrary p while also holding that one can at will form the belief that p for some p . As Ryan (2003, 63) points out, some people would never kill another for money. Even if the only consideration that could move one to kill is that the victim is otherwise going to cause great evil, it does not follow that one could not kill at will—it is just that one would kill at will only under very special circumstances. Similarly, even though money and other practical matters cannot move us to form the belief that p , it does not follow that we cannot be moved to form at will the belief that p .⁵

Scott-Kakures (1994, 93–96) explains the impossibility of forming the belief that p by appeal to a ‘cognitive fissure’ between the time at which one forms the intention to believe that p and the time at which one has the belief that p . His explanation assumes two constraints:

- i.* at time t , S can intend to believe that p *only if* S’s cognitive perspective at t does not sanction her believing that p (1994, 97)
- ii.* at time t , S can believe that p *only if* S’s cognitive perspective, at t , sanctions her believing that p (1994, 87)

Suppose S forms the intention to believe that p . If this intention is to cause the belief that p in a way appropriate for intentional action, this intention must guide and control the formation of the belief that p . For this to be possible, the intention must exist until the completion of the belief forming process. Given *i.*, this means that S’s cognitive perspective must continue to fail to sanction believing that p throughout the belief forming process. But given *ii.*, so long as S’s cognitive perspective fails to sanction her believing that p , S

⁵Steup (2000) is another philosopher who recently has criticized the idea that beliefs cannot be formed at will. According to him, our constitution is such that when forming beliefs we do it in light of the importance of truth and that no other consideration can move us to form a belief.

cannot form the belief that p . The upshot is that if S is to form the belief that p , the intention to believe that p must cease to exist before the belief that p is formed. The intention *cannot* exercise control and guidance throughout the belief forming process. Thus, the intention to form the belief that p *cannot* cause the belief that p in a way appropriate for intentional action.

The second constraint seems plausible enough. What it means is that “no one believes that p if she also believes that the belief that p is unsupported by any consideration having to do with the truth of p ” (1994, 87). However, i is false. Consider, for instance, Ryan’s description of changes in her beliefs on September 11, 2001:

...on the morning of September 11, 2001, I was listening to NPR and I believed that a plane accidentally crashed into one of the World Trade Centers. After the second plane hit the second tower and the Pentagon was hit, I decided that I was mistaken. I decided that I had better face reality and disbelieve that it was an accident and that’s what immediately happened. (2003, 65)

At a certain point of the day she believes that she has overwhelming evidence—i.e. her cognitive perspective sanctions believing—that the plane crashes are not accidents and decides—forms the intention—to believe that the crashes are no accidents. At this point, she does *not* believe that the crashes are not accidents. But her cognitive perspective sanctions her believing it. Very shortly afterwards, she forms the belief that the crashes are not accidents. If her description of the sequence of mental states she went through is accurate—and there seems to be no reason to cast doubt on her description—it is possible to intend to believe that p while one’s cognitive perspective sanctions believing that p . So i is false.⁶

⁶Radcliffe (1997) makes a similar point. She gives an example of someone intending to believe p *without* having the belief that she is unjustified in believing p . Even if we

Scott-Kakures does anticipate this objection. He holds that to believe that there is overall more evidence in favor of p is to believe that p is more likely true than not. And to believe that there is overwhelming evidence in favor of p is to believe that p . Hence, according to Scott-Kakures, it is not possible to believe that there is overwhelming evidence in favor of p but to fail to believe that p (1994, 99). Ryan's description taken at face value would be a misdescription of her situation.

It certainly seems right that in normal cases when one believes that there is overwhelming evidence in favor of p one also believes that p . But it would be a mistake to simply identify the belief that there is overwhelming evidence in favor of p with the belief that p as Scott-Kakures seems to be suggesting. After all, the two content propositions are clearly distinct with divergent truth-conditions (p can be true even in the absence of any evidence for it). And if they are not identical, we need further argument why in this case one cannot have the former belief without the latter. Scott-Kakures does not give us an argument and the plausibility of Ryan's description above indicates that his claim is in fact false.

Scott-Kakures's explanation of the impossibility of forming beliefs at will fails, too.

Why not simply accept that one can form beliefs at will? After all, Ryan's case just described does seem to be a case in which a decision to believe that p causes the belief that p and is that not a case of forming a belief at will?

Not quite. It is not enough for the decision to believe that p to cause the belief that p . It must cause it in a way appropriate for intentional action and the case described above does not show that the causal relation was indeed

interpret Scott-Kakures's constraints on belief and intention as rationality constraints and not as constraints on what is psychologically or metaphysically possible, the constraints are false: in Ryan's case, her intention to believe that the plane crashes are no accident is *rational* given her beliefs about what the evidence supports.

appropriate. In fact, the language Ryan uses is suggestive. She writes that “I decided ...and that’s what immediately *happened*” rather than “...and that’s what I immediately *did*.” It would be silly to make too big a deal out of the language she uses but it does seem more natural to describe the forming of her belief as something that happened rather than an action she performed. The important point is that for all that the example shows, it could be that the intention to believe that p causes the forming of the belief that p without it being a case of forming the belief that p at will.⁷

The following will give an account of belief formation that entails that the causal relation cannot be appropriate. The account will, however, allow for the possibility of an intention to believe that p causing the belief that p .

5. Taking aim

There are propositional attitudes that can be formed at will. For instance, one can easily suppose that p for arbitrary p . Otherwise, thought experiments would be impossible. One can also easily assume at will that p : Lavinia doesn’t know whether the guest speaker is going to arrive on time but decides to

⁷Steup (2000) also notes cases like Ryan’s to argue that there are cases of doxastic decisions that cause beliefs. He appeals to these cases to argue that belief formation is voluntary. Should he be interpreted as arguing that beliefs can be formed at will? There is a difference between believing voluntarily and forming a belief at will as noted in section 2. And it seems that it is best not to interpret him as arguing that beliefs can be formed at will. After all, his main concern is to argue that beliefs can sensibly be evaluated deontologically, and for that he needs to argue that beliefs can be formed voluntarily. For this purpose, it may be neither necessary nor sufficient to argue that beliefs can be formed at will. Similar points apply to Ryan (2003). Her concern, too, is to argue that beliefs are voluntary and for this she may not have to argue that beliefs can be formed at will. Ryan’s argument that beliefs are voluntary is that they are intentional. Whether believing intentionally requires being able to believe at will is an issue that is beyond the scope of this paper.

assume that he will and proceeds under that assumption. Assumptions and suppositions play belief-like roles in theoretical and practical reasoning. But, unlike beliefs, one can at will form suppositions and assumptions that p . What explains the difference?

A natural and fairly prominent starting point is the thought that this has something to do with aims involved in the process of belief formation. In particular, one might hold that belief formation is a goal-oriented activity and that this explains why beliefs cannot be formed at will. What feature of belief formation is it that makes it goal-oriented? One might hold, like Williams and O'Shaughnessy, that an activity must be caused in a certain way, viz. by the agent's having a certain aim, in order to be an instance of belief formation. As already noted, even if this were true, this will not explain why beliefs cannot be formed at will. But instead of focusing on the cause of an activity, we can also focus on certain intrinsic features of the activity to capture its goal-oriented character. The point is not that this or that explication of goal-orientedness is the correct one. Rather, the point is that various aspects of an activity can naturally be described in terms of goals or aims. The important question for purposes of this paper is whether some of these aspects can be appealed to in an explanation of the impossibility of forming beliefs at will.

The following example will help in bringing out the kind of feature of an activity that is of interest for this paper.

The Jackal, famed assassin, takes up his position in an attic overlooking a plaza in Paris. He sees his target, de Gaulle, *takes aim* carefully and pulls the trigger. Contrast this with the Coyote, not so famed assassin, on the same assignment. He takes up his position but since it is badly chosen he cannot see de Gaulle. He merely sees a vast crowd and he suspects that de Gaulle is in there somewhere. The Coyote takes up his rifle and shoots into the crowd in the hope of hitting de Gaulle. The Coyote has the aim of hitting de Gaulle

but he is not taking aim at his target.

What makes it the case that the Jackal is taking aim at a target? The Jackal goes through a sequence of coordinated activities—e.g. breathing quietly, holding his barrel steadily, moving the barrel in response to de Gaulle’s movements, etc.—and these activities are responses to what is and is not conducive to hitting the target. Taking aim is the kind of activity that is responsive to what facilitates achieving the aim which in the case of the Jackal is hitting de Gaulle.⁸

It is important to realize that while the Jackal might go through motions that are responsive to what facilitates hitting his target because of an explicit intention to hit de Gaulle, he need not have any such explicit intention to be taking aim at de Gaulle. Perhaps, shooting at targets is so routine he can do it absent-mindedly: he sees something move on the plaza, picks up his rifle, takes aim and pulls the trigger; all the while his mind is focused on the recent detrimental changes in his health insurance policy and he does not even realize that he is shooting at de Gaulle. In fact, such things are common-place. In driving a car, one must go through a large number of activities that involve taking aim: leave the driveway without hitting anything, turn around a corner and end up on the right side of the road, stop at a traffic light, etc. One can do these things while being preoccupied with other matters—e.g. the news on the radio, today’s lecture, vacation plans for next summer. One goes through motions that count as taking aim at turning around a corner and ending up on the right side of the street because the motions are responsive to what facilitates turning around the corner and ending up on the right side of the street. Whether such responsiveness is due to conscious control through the

⁸How good must be the responsiveness? Obviously, a lousy shot can still count as taking aim. But there is a limit as to how lousy one can be. Carefully directing the rifle at one’s own left foot is not a way of taking aim at de Gaulle even under the most lenient understanding of how responsive one must be to what facilitates hitting de Gaulle.

formation of intentions is not relevant.

Another thing to note: if the Jackal closes his eyes, imagines seeing a target and goes through the motions of hitting this imagined target, he is not taking aim at de Gaulle even if his motions are exactly the same as those he would go through if he were to take aim in the usual way. His motions are not in response to what facilitates hitting de Gaulle and so he is not taking aim at de Gaulle. Similarly, if the Jackal decides, just for the heck of it or because someone will give him a million dollars if he does, to go through a particular sequence of motions that happen to be exactly those that he would go through if he were to take aim at de Gaulle, he is not taking aim at de Gaulle. Again, his motions are not responsive to what facilitates hitting de Gaulle but instead are responsive to his intention to go through these particular motions. Finally, suppose the Jackal finds himself taking aim at de Gaulle even though he does not want to—he is horrified at finding himself taking aim. In such a case, we might refrain from attributing to the Jackal the action of taking aim, but what is happening is taking aim insofar as the motions are responsive to what facilitates hitting de Gaulle. The activity can be an instance of taking aim without being an instance of action.

Parallel things can be said about other activities that constitutively aim at certain ends. In general, an activity constitutively aims at an end only if the processes constituting the activity are responsive to what facilitates achieving the end.

What is it to be responsive to what facilitates achieving the end? In a very general sense, what is true of X is responsive to what is true of Y if what is true of X is causally dependent on what is true of Y. The Jackal's activities are responsive to what facilitates hitting his target in this sense because his activities are causally dependent on what facilitates hitting his target: if it is better to raise the barrel, he raises the barrel; if it is better to point more

to the left, he will do so, etc. But merely being causally dependent on what facilitates hitting the target does not make his action into a case of taking aim at the target. Several qualifications are needed.

The Jackal's activities may causally depend on what facilitates hitting the target in a way that is too 'remote.' For instance, suppose he is responding to instructions given to him by another person who is basing her instructions on her calculations of what the Jackal needs to do. In such a case, there is a causal dependence of the Jackal's activities on what facilitates hitting the target but the Jackal would not be taking aim. At most, the two of them together might be taking aim rather like a team manning a cannon might be taking aim as a team even though no single person in the team is taking aim. For the Jackal's activities to amount to taking aim at his target, they must be proximately causally dependent on what facilitates hitting the target where this means that what facilitates hitting the target must be the proximate causal explanation of the activities. For instance, in the case just considered, the proximate causal explanation of the Jackal's movements is that he is told to move in those ways and not that so moving facilitates hitting the target.⁹ But this qualification is not enough.

The causal dependence of the Jackal's activities on what facilitates hitting the target could also be counter-productive: if it is better to raise the barrel, he lowers the barrel; if it is better to point more to the left, he points more to the right, etc. In such a case the responsiveness would not constitute the Jackal's

⁹Notice that this does not mean that the Jackal is not taking aim if he makes some calculations about how he needs to move and then forms to intention to move in that way and this causes him to move in that way. In this case, his bodily movement itself is proximately causally explained by his intention and hence is not a case of taking aim. But his whole activity which includes his forming the intention *is* an instance of taking aim since that activity is proximately causally explained by what facilitates hitting the target.

taking aim at his target. A rather natural thought here is that the Jackal's activities must be proximately causally dependent on what facilitates hitting the target in such a way that the probability of his hitting the target given the causal dependence in that way is higher than if his activities were causally *independent* of what facilitates hitting the target. In short, taking aim at a target must make hitting the target more likely than not taking aim. While this may have intuitive appeal, it needs further refinement. The suggestion just stated requires that it *in fact* be more probable that the Jackal will hit his target if he takes aim but this is too strong. Suppose the sight on his rifle is misaligned so that in responding to what he sees through the sight he makes himself less likely to hit de Gaulle than if he were to simply shoot into the crowd. Even so, surely, this does not mean that the Jackal cannot be taking aim at his target in such a case.

The Jackal's activities that constitute his taking aim at de Gaulle are proximately causally dependent on information provided by his perceptual system. The function of the perceptual system is to make available information to the larger system that constitutes the agent so that it is possible to respond to the environment in various appropriate ways. Under normal circumstances, the information provided by the perceptual system is accurate so that normally the Jackal's taking aim would make it more probable that he will hit his target than if his activities were causally independent of the information provided. But his perceptual systems can be interfered with so that the information provided by them bear no resemblance to what is actually going on. In such a case, the Jackal's motions will not make his hitting the target more probable. In fact, in the extreme case there will be no target to hit. Nevertheless, even in such cases, the Jackal's activities are causally dependent on the information provided by faculties whose function is to provide useful information and in this sense his activities are responsive to what facilitates

hitting the target. Moreover, in taking aim his activities causally depend on the provided information in such a way that *if* the information were accurate, the probability of his hitting the target would be higher than if his activities were causally independent of the information. For instance, in the case of faulty information regarding the position of his target provided through his visual system (because of a misaligned sight, say), his responses are such that were the information accurate he would be more likely to hit the target than if he were to shoot randomly into the crowd. The Jackal is responsive to what facilitates achieving his aim of hitting de Gaulle insofar as a) the processes that constitute his taking aim are proximately causally dependent on information provided by faculties whose function is to make available useful information and b) the causal dependence is such that if the information were accurate, he would be more likely to hit the target than if the processes were causally independent of the information.

More generally, in the current context, the processes constituting an activity are responsive to what facilitates achieving a given end just in case a) they are proximately causally dependent on information made available through systems whose function is to provide information useful to achieving ends and b) the dependence is such that if the information were accurate, the end is more likely to be achieved than if the processes were causally independent of the information. An action *constitutively aims at an end* only if the processes constituting the action are responsive to what facilitates achieving the end in this sense. Usually, the information is more or less accurate but even if the workings of the information providing systems are severely compromised, their function is still to provide useful information so activities that constitutively aim at ends can take place even if perceptual faculties and the like are severely compromised.

This is only a necessary condition for an activity's constitutively aiming

at an end. A fuller account would need to answer further questions such as how much difference in probability the causal dependence must make or how robust and resistant to interference the dependence must be. However, for present purposes this necessary condition suffices.

6. Explaining the impossibility of forming beliefs at will

Here is a hypothesis: forming a belief constitutively aims at the truth; i.e., the formation of a belief must constitutively involve taking aim at the truth in the way the Jackal's shooting at de Gaulle constitutively involves taking aim at the target. Why should anybody agree to this? Because it explains why beliefs cannot be formed at will. The explanation will be given shortly. But, first, here are some remarks on the content of the hypothesis. The hypothesis, put more precisely, is:

S forms the belief that *p* *only if* S forms a propositional attitude that *p* such that the processes constituting the formation of the propositional attitude are responsive to what facilitates the formation of a propositional attitude whose content is true.

As in the general case for actions that constitutively aim at an end, this means that the process must be proximately causally dependent on information provided by faculties whose function is to provide information useful to achieving ends. Such faculties include perception, proprioception and memory.

Notice that the existence of cases like wishful thinking do not constitute counterexamples to this hypothesis. The workings of faculties like perception, proprioception and memory can be interfered with as in the case of wishful thinking or, more fancifully, in the case of skeptical scenarios. In the case of skeptical scenarios, for some reason—perhaps an evil demon or scientist—the agent's information providing faculties such as perceptual and memory

faculties are manipulated so that the belief forming mechanisms produce massive amounts of false beliefs in responding to information provided by these faculties. In the case of wishful thinking, the wish interferes with these faculties by perhaps suppressing certain memories, directing attention away from inconvenient facts, etc. so that by responding to information provided by these faculties the belief forming mechanisms end up being more likely to produce beliefs in line with what one wishes for. But even if the workings of these faculties are severely compromised, their *function* is still to provide information useful for achieving ends: something can have a function while doing a very lousy job at performing that function. The above hypothesis only requires that belief formation be proximally causally dependent on information provided by faculties whose function is to provide information useful for achieving ends. It is *not* part of the hypothesis that on any given occasion these faculties must be doing a good job.¹⁰ This, of course, is only a necessary condition for a process's being a case of belief formation. A full account of belief formation would at the very least require answers to the questions pointed out in the general case of activities that constitutively aim at ends. However, this necessary condition is all that is needed for current purposes as it holds the key to explaining the impossibility of forming beliefs at will.

Here is the promised explanation. As already noted, if one forms a belief that p at will, one's intention to form the belief that p must guide and control the formation of the belief. On the other hand, according to the above condition, if the formation of a propositional attitude is to be the formation of a belief, the process must be responsive to what facilitates getting it right where this

¹⁰Shah and Velleman (2005, 498–9) claim that a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for a state's being a belief is that it must be a state that is causally regulated by a truth-tracking mechanism. They do not say much about what this regulation has to look like. The position outlined here can be seen as an explication of the notion of being causally regulated by a truth-tracking mechanism.

means that the process must be proximately causally dependent on information provided by faculties whose function is to provide information useful for getting it right.

If it were possible to form beliefs at will, the intention to form the belief that p would have to control and guide the process which is to say that the process would have to be proximately causally dependent on the content of the intention. The dependence must be of the proximate kind for if the intention were not the proximate causal explanation of the process, the causal chain would be inappropriate for intentional action just as in the case of a man's intention to spill a glass causing nervousness which in turn causes his spilling. Now, if the process is proximately causally dependent on the content of the intention, the process would not be responsive to what facilitates the aim of truth since it is not the function of intention to provide information needed for successfully achieving ends. Thus, the intention to form the belief that p , if it is to cause the formation of the *belief* that p , must relinquish its control; otherwise, the formation of the propositional attitude cannot be the formation of the belief that p . So this is what is right about Scott-Kakures's proposal: the intention *cannot* control and guide the formation of the belief throughout the complete process if the process is to be the formation of a belief. But the explanation for this is that formation of a belief that p must be responsive to what facilitates the formation of a propositional attitude with a true content and hence cannot be controlled by the intention to form the belief.

It is the formation of the belief consequent upon the intention to believe that p that must itself be a process that is responsive to what facilitates achieving the aim of truth. That is, even if the intention is itself formed because the agent realizes that so believing is conducive to having true beliefs, the resulting formation of a propositional attitude is not a case of belief formation unless that process itself is responsive to what facilitates the aim. It is not enough

that the intention is controlled by what is conducive to having true beliefs; i.e. the *agent's* aiming at the truth is not sufficient.

This also explains why one cannot be deliberately irrational when it comes to beliefs. As Steup (2000) and Ryan (2003) note, there are times when one decides, forms the intention, to believe that p where this intention then appears to cause the belief that p . But these are cases in which the agent takes herself to have enough evidence to support the belief that p . Even if one intends to believe that the Moon is made of Swiss cheese because doing so will make one immensely rich, one cannot thereby bring oneself to believe it if there is not enough evidence to support the belief. Why is this? It is because the formation of the belief must be responsive to what facilitates the aim of truth. If information made available through the relevant faculties is insufficient, the process will not form the belief that p no matter how strongly one intends to believe that p . This is why one cannot be deliberately irrational. Now, the belief forming process can get stuck, as it were, through interference or other factors and the intention to believe that p upon recognition that there is enough evidence might at times be able to get the process going. This would indeed be a case in which the intention to believe that p causes the belief that p . So Steup and Ryan are right that one can recognize that the evidence indicates that p , form the intention to believe that p and thereby cause oneself to believe that p . But it would not be a case of forming the belief at will since the belief forming process itself is not proximately causally dependent on the content of the intention.

To wrap up, the process of forming a belief that is initiated by the intention to form the belief that p must itself be a process responsive to what facilitates achieving the aim of truth and this is why the intention cannot cause the belief that p in a way that is appropriate for action. This is the explanation why it is not possible to form at will the belief that p for *any* p .

To the extent that this explanation succeeds and is better than the available alternative explanations, there is reason to hold that forming a belief indeed involves taking aim at the truth.¹¹

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