

Willing Belief and the Norm of Truth*

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Abstract: Bernard Williams has argued that, because belief aims at getting the truth right, it is a conceptual truth that we cannot directly will to believe. Many others have adopted Williams' claim that believers necessarily respect truth-conducive reasons and evidence. By presenting increasingly stronger cases, I argue that, on the contrary, believers can quite consciously disregard the demand for truth-conducive reasons and evidence. The irrationality of those who would directly will to believe is not any greater than that displayed by some actual believers. So, our inability to directly will to believe is a contingent truth (at best).

It is more conformable to the ordinary wisdom of nature to secure so necessary an act of the mind, by some instinct or mechanical tendency, which may be infallible in its operations, may discover itself at the first appearance of life and thought, and may be independent of all the laboured deductions of the understanding.

--David Hume¹

Hume famously argued that reason alone could never justify the acceptance of inductive judgments. But Hume coupled this skepticism with the observation that, fortunately, our nature ignores this limitation of rationality and instinctively forces us to accept such judgments anyway. This is *fortunate*, because our nature could have been otherwise—perhaps we could have been constructed so as to voluntarily adopt skepticism. The general Humean point is that the voluntariness/involuntariness of our belief formation and our respect/disrespect for rationality are contingent truths.

More recent arguments have been advanced against this Humean doctrine. In particular, it has been argued that it is a *necessary* truth that we form beliefs involuntarily and out of respect for reason. Further, there is supposed to be an intimate connection between these alleged truths. Bernard Williams has presented the best-known argument for the conclusion that, due to rationality restrictions, directly willing belief is conceptually incoherent. His reasoning is found in the following paragraph:

If I could acquire a belief at will, I could acquire it whether it was true or not; moreover I would know that I could acquire it whether it was true or not. If in full consciousness I could will to acquire a 'belief' irrespective of its truth, it is

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unclear that before the event I could seriously think of it as a belief, i.e. as something purporting to represent reality. At the very least, there must be a restriction on what is the case after the event; since I could not then, in full consciousness, regard this as a belief of mine, i.e. something I take to be true, and also know that I acquired it at will. With regard to no belief could I know—or, if all this is to be done in full consciousness, even suspect—that I had acquired it at will.²

This argument has the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*, beginning with a claim about what would follow from the assumption that one could will belief. Assume that you can acquire a belief at will. You can then form beliefs irrespective of their truth values (and you know that you can do this). Will a belief, any belief. Since believing something typically does not make it so, you have no good reason for thinking that your directly willed belief accurately represents reality.³ With awareness of the fact that you directly willed the belief comes an awareness of the fact that you have no reason to think that your belief accurately represents reality. But then the so-called ‘belief’ is not something you actually believe (after all, beliefs *do* purport to accurately represent reality), contrary to the original assumption.⁴

Much has been made of this argument that we cannot directly will to believe.⁵ In recent years, Williams (1973) has been explicitly accepted as a starting point for expanding philosophical analyses of belief to include evidential support.⁶ And psychologists seeking explanations that preserve the rationality of those with psychiatric delusional disorders have even latched onto Williams’ observations.⁷ The argument has even been extended to purportedly show the unwillability of desire.⁸ But in spite of its influence, it is worth stressing that Williams’ conclusion is strongly qualified. In particular, he concludes that we cannot have a belief that a) we know (or suspect) to have acquired at will, b) fully before our consciousness, where c) this was a *direct* (i.e., unmediated) willing. Only the combination of a), b) and c) is held to be *necessarily* unattainable—call this the *Williams Thesis*. This leaves open the following possibilities:

- 1) Forgetting: An agent directly wills a belief, which becomes fully present before her consciousness, but which she does not suspect of having willed.

- 2) Submerging: An agent knows that she willed a certain belief, but that belief is not before her consciousness.
- 3) Biasing: An agent decides to manipulate evidence, exploit some brute psychological mechanism (e.g., peer pressure, hypnotism, etc.), or otherwise bias her belief-forming capacities so that she ends up with the desired conscious belief.

The combination to which Williams limits his discussion is an extreme one. As a matter of psychological reality, those with the power and inclination to will belief would more likely fall under possibilities 1), 2), or 3). These (real-world!) possibilities, untouched by Williams' argument, merit some discussion. It will eventually be shown that there is not a large gulf between these three possibilities and the combination addressed by the Williams Thesis.

Let us first consider forgetting cases. Williams asserts that having the ability to will belief requires that one know that one has this ability. This might be too strict a requirement for ability-possession, but let us grant it for the moment. Still, an agent could know that she has this general ability, but forget that she used it on a certain occasion. Such an agent directly wills a certain belief, which becomes conscious from time to time, but the fact that it was directly willed does not enter her consciousness. This possibility, naturally understood as a type of self-deception, is left unaddressed by Williams' argument. And, it seems that if it were/is possible to directly will belief most such instances would fall under this category. Those who simply decide to believe that p are unlikely to remind themselves that they have so willed. Believers generally do respect the evidence, and knowledge of such a willing is bound to cause some epistemic tension.

A submerging case is one in which the agent knows that she willed a belief, but the belief itself is not conscious. Perhaps the belief is justifiably attributed to the agent on the basis of behavioral dispositions alone. There is more to a belief than its presentation to consciousness, and a large part of a belief's nature is its capacity to guide our actions. Williams' argument leaves open the possibility that one could directly will a

set of behavioral dispositions. Such dispositions may be enough to warrant a belief ascription even without the attributed belief content ever consciously entering the agent's mind. It may seem unlikely that the belief could remain unconscious while the fact that it was willed is before consciousness. But, for completeness, we should include submerging cases as possibilities left open by the Williams Thesis.

Finally, an agent can decide to bias her belief-forming capacities so that she ends up with her desired belief. Further, she might even remember that she entered into this self-deception (or, otherwise motivated biasing).⁹ Such activity is a *perversion* of rationality. The agent might, consciously or not, recognize that the evidence she confronts influences what she comes to believe. So, she avoids evidence contrary to her desired hypothesis. Or, she may give privileged position to evidence confirming what she desires to believe—a common psychological phenomenon known as confirmation bias.¹⁰ Alternatively, an agent might ignore the evidence altogether and exploit brute psychological mechanisms to acquire a belief. A brute psychological mechanism is a causal process for fixing or influencing belief that does not make use of the reasoning abilities of the agent. Such mechanisms include exposure, repetition, subliminal messages, hypnotism, classical conditioning, etc.

The previous four paragraphs show us that there is much conceptual space for the possibility of willed beliefs. So, the Williams Thesis is much more complicated than the Anti-Jamesian slogan “We cannot will to believe.” It should be clear which combination Williams argued to be untenable: a belief that is before one's consciousness, accompanied with the knowledge that one directly willed it. But this might strike the reader as an odd necessary truth—it seems to be a patchwork of provisos chosen solely to avoid counter-examples. Why *should* we be concerned with such a combination? We should be concerned with this combination for the very reason Williams offers against its possibility—is it possible for a believer to disregard evidence and concern for truth to such an extreme degree? Or, for each belief that we consider, must we (minimally!)

respect the evidence, or lack thereof, supporting it? This a), b), and c) combination is a nice test-case for determining the appropriate strength of rationality constraints on believing.

Williams' argument plays on the norms of truth and rationality. Belief, Williams and others have claimed, aims at the truth. More recently, this slogan has been qualified: belief aims at the truth, *for the purposes of getting the truth value right*.¹¹ The idea is that, in part, what it is to be a believer is to be someone who respects the norm of truth. This requires believers to have reasons for thinking that what they believe is true. Call these *truth-conducive* reasons. Such reasons might come in the form of perceptual evidence, inferences from perceptual evidence, testimony from a reliable source, etc. Those who will to believe presumably lack (sufficient) truth-conducive reasons for what they believe, and they are aware of this fact.¹² But this is impossible (given respect for the norm of truth), so one cannot will to believe.

But, is concern for the norm of truth partially constitutive of belief? There are certainly many cases in which people believe on the basis of very poor reasons—"reasons" that do not adequately support the believed hypothesis. My strategy in what follows is to gradually introduce six ways in which believers show disrespect for, or otherwise fall short with regard to, the norm of truth. After introducing these actual violations of the norm, I argue that counter-examples to the Williams Thesis are but another small, seventh step. Such counter-examples are at least *possible*, and that is enough to disprove the Williams Thesis.

Step 1. Possession of "reasons" that are not actually truth-conducive, but are taken by the agent as such.

Many of us display an ingenuity that reveals how easy it can be to come up with "truth conducive" reasons. If one is motivated and clever enough, then any evidence which, to an objective observer, tells against the hypothesis can be explained away or

even held to support the desired belief. A woman may wish to believe that a certain man is interested in her. When he adamantly insists to her that he is not interested, she refuses to accept his claims at face value—he is just too shy to let his true feelings show. Not only might she fail to treat his statements as truth-conducive reasons for the negation of her desired hypothesis, she might even interpret them as supporting her belief. She reasons: If he's interested in me, then he will deny it. The same perversion of rationality is displayed by conspiracy theorists who hold positions that are not only unfalsifiable, but are (allegedly) supported by almost any observation (e.g., Of course the aliens would not want to reveal themselves!). As a final example, some schizophrenics and brain injured persons are notoriously adept at offering reasons in support of their delusional beliefs. Consider the following dialogue regarding a patient who is unaware of his left-field blindness and left-side paralysis:

The examiner, placing the patient's left hand in the patient's right visual field, asks: 'Whose hand is this?':
Patient: Your hand.
The examiner then places the patient's left hand between his own hands, and asks: 'Whose hands are these?':
Patient: Your hands.
Examiner: How many of them?
Patient: Three.
Examiner: Ever see a man with *three* hands?
Patient: A hand is the extremity of an arm. Since you have three arms it follows that you must have three hands.¹³

Schizophrenics with persecutory delusions often come up with similar, elaborate reasoning to support their claims.

But cases like these do not disprove the Williams Thesis. Although the overly optimistic woman, conspiracy theorists, and otherwise deluded individuals in our examples may not have reasons that actually support the truth of their preferred hypotheses, they have reasons that they *take* to be truth-conducive. They are wrong, but at least they feel some obligation to explain away potentially falsifying evidence or to positively support their positions. And this is all that the Williams Thesis requires—that

they show a respect for evidence by believing as they deem the evidence to point. Believers, after all, can still be irrational and make mistakes.

Step 2. Offering “truth-conducive reasons” that lend no understandable support.

One might worry, however, that there are more extreme cases in which there is no understandable connection between the evidence an agent cites and the belief the evidence allegedly supports. Such cases are ones in which the agent appears to be taking some observation as a truth-conducive reason for a belief, but a “normal” observer cannot comprehend how that evidence could possibly support the belief. Such is the case with delusions of reference, which occur when individuals inappropriately interpret public phenomena (e.g., a rock band’s music) as containing messages especially for them. While such delusions are usually accompanied with a paranoid mood, which might explain the general tone of the delusion’s content, the precise nature of the “hidden message” seems to be wholly without evidential support. With such cases, it is unclear if the agent is sincerely appreciating the norm of possessing truth-conducive reasons.

Step 3. Believing contrary to normal evidential standards, or discounting evidence.

So far we have only considered cases in which an agent, either intentionally or innocently, reasons inappropriately in offering truth-conducive reasons. In the examples presented thus far, each agent still believed as they judged the evidence to point—they were simply mistaken about where the evidence pointed. However, it sometimes happens that an agent believes some proposition while sincerely conceding that the evidence points against that belief. Religious beliefs sometimes fall under this category, but there are various other areas in which we believe on faith, or believe contrary to our normal evidential standards. We often hold beliefs about our friends or family members that are not justified given the evidence we have about them. We *want* to believe the best of them. We can admit that this evidence would be sufficient to form an unpleasant belief

about someone *else*, but because of our special relationships to them we require much higher standards for our friends and family. It also sometimes happens that the agent does not form new standards for evaluating her friends. Rather, she might simply ignore the evidence altogether.¹⁴

Agents in such a position can be well aware of their irrationality, and may even honestly admit it. Still, such cases would violate the core spirit of Williams' claim about the connection between evidence and belief. Williams asserted that part of what it is to believe something is to think that there are reasons for that belief-content to be true. But in these cases, the agents concede that there are better reasons for the truth of the *negation* of their belief-content.

Step 4. Believing with complete indifference to the evidence.

In the cases involving biased beliefs about friends or family members, the agents presumably had *some* truth-conducive reasons in support of their belief. But, these reasons should have been overridden by the opposing evidence. Even further on the irrationality spectrum is a complete indifference to the epistemic requirement to possess truth-conducive reasons. This indifference could be either a conscious flouting of the truth-conducivity norm altogether, or a *de facto* disregard for truth-conducive reasons.

De facto violations are psychologically realistic—they occur whenever beliefs are formed and/or maintained by brute psychological mechanisms. One example of such a mechanism is peer pressure, broadly construed as a passive tendency to believe as those in one's environment believe. This can often be understood as a tacit appeal to an irrelevant authority. Because the "appeal" is tacit, the agent is not attempting to provide evidential support for his belief. Such beliefs are simply caused, and are not had for epistemic reasons. A third-person party, such as an advertiser or unscrupulous religious leader, could exploit these mechanisms so as to directly cause beliefs, without providing

any epistemic reasons. Exposure, repetition, positive associations, and other conditioning methods can lead to this result.

Turning again to cases of severe delusional disorders provides us with a final example of the extreme ways evidence can be disconnected from belief. Although some severely deluded individuals will concoct elaborate tales in support of their delusions (recall the testimony of the “three-handed examiner” discussed above), others find no need to justify their delusions or defend them in the face of falsifying evidence. Breen, et al., (2000) questioned three individuals of this type. Two of these patients—FE and TH—suffered from Mirrored-Self Misidentification (i.e., they treated their reflections as another person, though they seemed to correctly explain the concept of a mirror and could identify the reflections of others). A third, DB, was diagnosed with Reduplicative Paramnesia: DB thought her husband had died 4 years ago, while also taking him to be a current patient in her hospital. Each of these three felt little or no need to respond to evidence contrary to their belief:

FE’s family tried on numerous occasions to dissuade him from his belief by providing him with evidence contrary to the delusion. FE would listen attentively to their arguments and often agreed with their logic, but his delusional belief remained steadfast ... In the face of contradictory evidence, however, DB doggedly adhered to her delusional beliefs without altering the content of the belief in any way, indicating that her delusional beliefs were strong. A noteworthy feature of the behavior of FE, TH, and DB was the way in which they replied to questions regarding their delusions. Their replies were immediate, and they never attempted to convince the interviewer of the validity of their delusional belief. If a question were put to them that they could not explain, they simply admitted it. For example, FE and TH both agreed that it was very strange that the *other person* was in their own homes but neither man felt any obligation to provide an explanation for it.¹⁵

These cases, while certainly unusual and highlighting breakdowns in normal psychological functioning, still support the claim that it is possible for one to believe something while being indifferent to evidence for or against the truth of that belief.

Step 5. Maintaining a belief caused by a brute psychological mechanism, even after conscious awareness of its origin.

De facto cases show that it is psychologically possible for an agent to believe without having truth-conducive reasons. Now let us add to the story. Suppose that a belief is caused in an agent through such mechanisms, and the agent later becomes aware of the fact that his belief was caused in this brute way. Yet after becoming aware of the fact that he has no truth-conducive reasons for this hypothesis, he still maintains his belief. This is not just fiction, but accurately describes some psychological phenomena. A person can be aware that her beliefs on a certain matter are solely the result of peer pressure or environmental suggestion. This awareness does not necessarily destroy these beliefs. For example, a young American devoted to Christianity may sincerely believe that his religion offers the only path to paradise. He may also have learned from his comparative religion class that were he to have been raised in, say, Iran he would have sincerely believed that Islam provides the only path to paradise. So, he realizes that his Christian beliefs are accidental (i.e., an accident of his birthplace). Yet despite knowledge that his belief is accidental, he maintains his belief that Christianity offers the exclusive path to paradise.

The more general point is that, regardless of whether or not we have truth-conducive evidence, we can maintain a belief even while knowing that it has a brute, quite accidental, cause. Since the belief is not held for truth-conducive reasons, we could just as easily have been caused to believe its negation (or a contradictory alternative). Still, knowing this might neither shake our belief nor motivate us to seek additional evidence.

Step 6. Maintaining a belief after all the evidence for that belief has been discredited.

Beliefs tend to persevere even when they were not caused merely by a brute psychological mechanism. Anderson, et al., (1980) conducted two experiments testing whether beliefs tend to persist even when *all* the evidence for those beliefs has been

discredited. In their studies, subjects were provided with fictitious data showing a strong correlation between certain personality traits and the likelihood for success as a firefighter. The subjects, presumably having given little thought to this matter before, formed beliefs on the basis of this limited evidence. In one of the groups the subjects were also instructed to provide explanations for these apparent correlations. Members of each group were then informed that the evidence was completely fictitious. Still, the subjects tended to retain the belief formed on that evidence, with the rate being even higher for the group that offered explanations for this fictitious correlation. The researchers concluded as follows:

In sum, the results strongly support the hypothesis that even after the initial evidential basis for their beliefs has been totally refuted, people fail to make appropriate revisions in those beliefs. That subjects' theories survived virtually intact is particularly impressive when one contrasts the minimal nature of the evidential base from which subjects' initial beliefs were derived (i.e., two "data points"), with the decisiveness of the discrediting to which that evidence was subjected. In everyday experience our intuitive theories and beliefs are sometimes based on just such inconclusive data, but challenges to such beliefs and the formative data for those beliefs are rarely as decisive as the discrediting procedures employed in this study.¹⁶

This study shows how easy it can be to maintain a belief in the face of challenges that should, rationally, lead the agent to suspend judgment.¹⁷

Step 7. Maintaining a belief while consciously aware that it was directly willed.

So far we have turned to both everyday, anecdotal examples as well as more unusual cases of psychiatric disorders to show that believers can fall short of satisfying the norm of truth in a variety of ways. After having been presented with at least one example for each of the previous six possibilities, it is obvious that knowledge of a lack of evidential support is not *necessarily* enough to destroy belief. And why think that directly willing belief would be different in kind—on the side of conceptual impossibility—from the above possibilities?

One difference is that if we could directly will beliefs, then we could *immediately* change our doxastic states so as to better accord with awareness of the lack of evidential support. When the direct-willer becomes aware of his lack of truth-conducive reasons, then he can immediately will himself into a state of suspended judgment. This ability might be lacking in those whose beliefs are manipulated by biased reasoning or brute psychological mechanisms. We have seen that, as a matter of psychological fact, often the effects of biased reasoning and brute psychological mechanisms cannot be eliminated immediately upon their discovery by the agent. That is, those who recognize the effects of, say, peer pressure generally cannot immediately nullify them and believe as the evidence indicates. (That is why there are cult “de-programmers.”) But, those who could directly will belief would have this power.

While it is true that those who could will belief would have this power, it does not follow that they would use it so as to have their beliefs accord with the evidence. Why think that such an agent would be inclined to have their beliefs match the evidence?¹⁸ In real-world cases, agents who acknowledge that their beliefs are not supported by the evidence sometimes rest content with this fact. They might not be motivated in the slightest to seek supporting evidence or explain away the contradicting evidence. There is little reason to think that those with the ability to directly will beliefs would have different inclinations.

The manner in which direct-willers would violate the norm of truth is no different from the manner in which some actual believers violate the norm of truth. Direct-willers can maintain a belief while being fully conscious of the fact that they hold that belief irrespective of the truth-conducive reasons. In this regard, the direct-willer is no different from the study subjects whose beliefs persevered even when all the evidence for those beliefs was discredited. Or, for a more unusual example, they are like the patients suffering from Mirrored-Self Misidentification or Reduplicative Paramnesia who are unfazed by the mountain of evidence against their beliefs.

Note again that Williams judges it impossible to *maintain* a belief that *p* in the presence of conscious knowledge of its being directly willed. But Williams is underestimating the force of the assumption used in his *reductio*. We are to assume that after the willing the agent really does think that the world is such that *p*. Even if she were to recall that she simply willed herself to believe that *p*, she would likely view that willing as a fortunate coincidence. “How lucky I am to have willed a belief that is true!” we can imagine her thinking to herself. This parallels the attitude we can imagine the Christian in our example taking. We can imagine him thinking, “How lucky I am to have been born in America, so that I would have the correct religious belief!”

This Christian might recognize that he has his religious beliefs merely because his parents and others *told him* to so believe. He needn’t think (at least now, as a *college-educated* young man) that they are authorities on religious matters, and they needn’t have provided him with evidence for these religious claims. Our Christian can recognize this ancestry of his belief, but retain it nonetheless. Now, if he can maintain these beliefs, without evidence or on expert testimony, merely because of what someone else told him to believe, it seems that he could also maintain beliefs, without evidence or on expert testimony, merely because of what he told himself to believe.

Before concluding, let us respond to a couple of the more obvious objections to the present view. I have argued that an agent can hold beliefs that even that agent judges unlikely to be true *given the available evidence*. Such agents *do not believe on the basis of evidence*. But due to the alleged holism of the mental, an objector might think that such disconnect between an individual belief and available evidence (which is itself a set of beliefs) is too great. Beliefs do not come in isolation, this opponent argues. Instead, forming and maintaining any belief requires accepting many other beliefs and inferences. If the Reduplicative Paramnesiac believed that her husband is dead, then she would *not* believe that he is alive in a room down the hall. Our Reduplicative Paramnesiac, DB,

does believe the latter, so she cannot believe the former. For similar reasons, we cannot will beliefs in isolation. Willing a belief requires a commitment to accepting certain other beliefs (e.g., evidence) and inferences. If the other evidence available to the agent offers reasons against the willed belief, then a “showdown” with these other beliefs rationally should lead to the loss of the willed belief (or the prior beliefs). Daniel Dennett eloquently concludes the following about arbitrarily implanted beliefs (an analogue to a directly willed belief):

...one cannot directly and simply cause or implant a belief, for a belief is essentially something that has been *endorsed* (by commission or omission) by the agent on the basis of its conformity with the rest of his beliefs. One may well be able to produce a zombie, either surgically or by brainwashing, and one might even be able to induce a large network of false beliefs in a man, but if so, their persistence *as beliefs* will depend, not on the strength of any sutures, but on their capacity to win contests against conflicting claims in evidential showdowns.¹⁹

Here we see a holistic rationality restriction—if the implanted (or, in our case, directly willed) belief conflicts with the other beliefs the agent possesses, then the willed belief will not persist.²⁰ Of course, Dennett allows for some inconsistencies in belief sets, but presumably our direct-willer, like DB, has gone too far.²¹

There are two ways we can respond to this holism/rationality objection.

Unsurprisingly, we can deny or grant Dennett’s point. One way to deny the point is to argue that such “evidential showdowns” need not ever occur. An agent’s conflicting beliefs might not ever be laid side by side for analysis. Beliefs can remain segregated so as to maintain the existence of desirable belief sets that nevertheless conflict/contradict. This is the case with those individuals who segregate their scientific and religious beliefs, or accept different evidential standards for their family and friends. But even if such beliefs are not segregated, the showdown could result in such belief sets shooting past one another. This is the case with DB. Her beliefs that her husband is both dead and that he is down the hall do not “shoot down” one another. And our Christian can recognize the non-truth-conducive reasons responsible for his religious beliefs, and yet still have his

belief persist. He either judges that standards he accepts in other domains (e.g., scientific ones) do not apply here or simply discounts their verdict. A literal “holism of the mental” is something of a myth, given the belief-segregation of actual believers.²²

But the conceptual possibility of directly willing belief is also consistent with granting Dennett’s holistic rationality restrictions. We could grant that it is a conceptual truth that some beliefs cannot be directly willed in isolation (because they would be incompatible with the bulk of the agent’s other beliefs). But it is still conceptually possible for any belief to be directly willed *along with a minimal set of accompanying beliefs and inferential commitments*. Note that the agent can will as such while still retaining the perceptual and other beliefs that initially appear to falsify the directly willed belief. The agent, consistent with the holistic rationality requirement, need only generate new beliefs to explain away the tension between the apparently falsifying evidence and the willed belief. Much like a scientist can save her theory in the face of recalcitrant data by adding auxiliary hypotheses, so can our direct-willer. This was the tactic of our conspiracy theorist. In its extreme form, this type of rationalization ends in making the beliefs unfalsifiable. But rather than add auxiliary beliefs to have the willed belief cohere with the prior evidence, an entirely new body of evidence (i.e., secondary beliefs) could be willed to support the primary willed belief. This parallels Dennett’s example of a third-party directly inserting a “large network of false beliefs.” For example, the belief that someone has three arms could supplement the primary willed belief that that person has three hands. While such evidence is not directly willed, it is nevertheless generated to provide rational support for a false belief that did not cohere with the agent’s prior evidential base.

Another objection, related to the holism worry, holds that the connection between evidence and belief is a matter of linguistic necessity. Just as many hold it to be an analytic truth that beliefs are connected to actions in certain content-sensitive ways, one might think it is an analytic truth that beliefs are connected to evidence in content-

sensitive ways. Against this objection we could turn to everyday belief attributions that tell against this claim—consider all our above examples of people who believe for non-truth-conducive reasons. But rather than argue this analyticity point, it is more important to note that those intentional attitudes that couple with desires to prompt action (attitudes that *I* would call beliefs), and otherwise satisfy the belief-role, need not be supported with truth-conducive reasons. The main issue is not the linguistic one: Should we call something a belief if it is held without proper respect for truth-conducive reasons? Rather, the issue is: Can someone maintain the conviction that *p* is true while being consciously aware of the fact that this conviction is based solely on accidental causes and is not supported by truth-conducive reasons? I have argued that the answer to the second question is ‘Yes.’

The view advocated here minimizes the role that the norm of truth plays for believers *as a matter of conceptual necessity*. When an agent believes that *p*, she believes that *p* is true. But, she can take *p* to be true all the while knowing that she does not have any reasons or evidence that point to the truth of *p*. I would further suggest that believing is simply regarding as true, regardless of whether the believer is motivated to get the truth-value right. Of course, as a matter of fact, human believers are very much concerned with possessing truth-conducive reasons and this might partially explain our (contingent) inability to believe at will. This accords well with a generally Humean view of belief.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Hume (1993), p. 37.

² Williams (1973), p. 148.

³ There are some situations in which our willing to believe does make, or make it more likely that, the proposition under consideration true. If believing that you can do something makes it more likely that you can, then the belief itself is some evidence for its own truth. Such cases are immune to Williams' argument.

⁴ It is unclear if this argument is actually a *reductio*, however. An alternative reading of the argument holds that Williams is conceding the ability to *form* directly willed beliefs, but not *maintain* them. In this case, one could directly will a belief, but it would die off quickly. Daniel Dennett (1978), pp. 250-253, writing on related matters, poses the problem as one of belief maintenance. But, one might also think that such short-lived and fragile "beliefs" are not really beliefs. My objections below apply to either interpretation of Williams' argument.

⁵ For discussion and criticism of Williams (1973), see Bennett (1990), Cook (1987), and Winters (1979).

⁶ For example, Velleman (2000), Chapter 11. Velleman (2000) and Williams (1973) certainly are not alone in requiring a necessary connection between evidence and belief. See also, Hampshire (1965), p. 87 and Dennett (1978), pp. 44, 249-253.

⁷ Stone and Young (1997), pp. 353-354.

⁸ Millgram (1997).

⁹ Such cases are provided in Cook (1987).

¹⁰ For a thorough examination of the varieties of such biases, see Klayman (1995).

¹¹ Velleman (2000), pp. 250-252.

¹² An agent could have sufficient evidence for a certain belief, but decide to acquire it by a direct willing instead. But, it seems much more likely that one would will to believe

something because the evidence does not support it (e.g., because it cannot be believed in the conventional way, by relying on reasons).

¹³ Bisiach (1988), p. 469 (quoted in Stone and Young (1997), p. 340 (*italics in original*)).

¹⁴ Cook (1987) considers similar examples, and describes such cases as involving changes in standards for evaluating evidence.

¹⁵ Breen, et al. (2000), pp. 83, 105 (*italics in original*).

¹⁶ Anderson, Lepper, and Ross (1980), p. 1042.

¹⁷ It should be noted that the results of Hatvany and Strack (1980) seem to contradict this perseverance claim. In the Hatvany and Strack experiments, subjects pretended to be jurors and were presented with witness testimony. This testimony was later discredited. These “jurors” reacted in a rational manner, and the discredited testimony left no residual effects. This study does differ in many ways from that of Anderson, et al., (1980), however, and these differences offer alternative explanations. The witness testimony was refuted quickly after its presentation, the “jurors” were not asked to create explanations for the observations, and the jury setting is one in which respect for rational evidence-evaluation is salient.

¹⁸ We should acknowledge that Williams does not think that the failure of a direct-willing would result from a conscious decision to believe as the evidence points. Still, he claims that, in some sense, believers are necessarily inclined to respect truth-conducive reasons.

¹⁹ Dennett (1978), pp. 252-253 (*italics in original*).

²⁰ For similar holistic rationality restrictions—this time inspired from a theory of meaning, and not in terms of belief persistence—see Quine (1960), Chapter 2 and Davidson (1984).

²¹ Also note: The holism objection does not handle cases in which people will to believe things that rationally cohere with their other beliefs.

²² Cherniak (1986), Stich (1990) and Stein (1996) also attack the idealistic rationality constraints that Dennett and Davidson impose on believers. Instead, they endorse

minimal rationality constraints. However, it seems that many of those in our examples (e.g., DB and our Christian) do not pass even these weakened rationality constraints. The matter is complicated, though, by the context-sensitivity of the standards these authors endorse, along with the weight they give to empirical considerations (that have not yet been settled) from the project of naturalized epistemology.

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