Deciding to Believe

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Sometimes we judge that a person was not justified in coming to have a particular belief. We think that, given what she was aware of at the time, she ought not to have adopted the belief. For example: "You ought not to have leaped to the conclusion that he was bored just because he looked at his watch." "You ought not to have concluded she was still at home just because her phone was busy." "The jurors ought not to have believed his mother's statement (that at the time of the murder he was with her two miles away from the scene of the crime), since they knew she had a strong motive to lie about the matter."

It seems that in making such judgments we presuppose that the person could in the circumstances have not come to have the belief in question, that she chose or decided to believe that which we fault her for believing. Or else (if we are unsure of, or disbelieve, this presupposition, as is often the case) our judgment is tacitly conditional: We mean that, if she could have decided otherwise, then she ought not to have decided as she did. If this is right, then our judgment makes sense only if it makes sense to suppose that a person might come to believe something simply by deciding to do so.

Some, however, have thought that this is ruled out by the very concept of what it is to believe a truth-valued proposition. Others have thought that, though it is conceptually possible, deciding to believe is never psychologically possible and, if it did occur, it would be quite irrational. Against these views, I wish to defend the naive intuition that coming to believe something just by deciding to do so is possible, that it sometimes seems to us that we do this, and that our doing so need not offend against epistemic reason. My hope is to make it plausible that there is a sort of state that counts as a state of believing a proposition, which state is such that it is clear that one could
come to be in such a state simply by deciding to do so, and clear, moreover, that such decisions can (though they need not) be perfectly rational and motivated entirely by one’s appraisal of the available evidence and one’s general desire that one’s beliefs be true. (Later I will consider the reasons some have offered for denying that deciding to believe is conceptually possible or for denying that it is psychologically possible.)

1

Let me start by giving examples of the sorts of cases that seem to me good candidates for being described as someone’s deciding to believe something. Then I will indicate what it is in these cases that (as it seems to me) both constitutes the subject’s believing a proposition and is such that it came into existence directly by the subject’s deciding that it would.

1. Sam is on a jury deliberating whether to find the defendant guilty as charged; if certain statements of a certain witness in the trial are true, then the defendant cannot have done what he is charged with; Sam deliberates whether to believe those statements, to believe the prosecutor’s intimations that the witness lied, or to withhold belief on the matter altogether. He decides to believe the witness and votes to acquit.

2. Sue is in a poker game of seven-card stud. After all cards have been dealt, everyone folds except Sue and Hank. Sue has three aces showing and two kings in the hole. The fourth ace was seen in an already folded hand. Hank has three jacks showing. If he has a fourth jack in the hole, he beats Sue’s full house. Hank raises by a fairly substantial sum. Sue asks herself, “Shall I see him or fold? Does he have a Jack in the hole or is he bluffing? I detect a certain subtle nervousness in Hank’s manner. Of course, he could be pretending to be worried so as to lure me into betting, but I’ve played with him a number of times and don’t recall his having tried that sort of pretense before, and he is generally such an open book that I doubt very much he could pull it off.” So she decides to dismiss that possibility, to read Hank as being anxious about bluffing; she decides to believe that he does not have a Jack in the hole and meets his raise while beginning to think about what she will do with the winnings. She is greatly surprised when Hank reveals that he does have the fourth jack.

3. Before Sam left for his office this morning, Sue asked him to bring from his office, when he comes back, a particular book that she needs to use in preparing for her lecture the next day. Later Sue wonders whether Sam will remember to bring the book. She recalls that he has sometimes, though not often, forgotten such things, but, given the inconvenience of getting in touch with him and interrupting his work and the thought that her continuing to wonder whether he’ll remember it will make her anxious all day, she decides to stop fretting and believe that he will remember to bring it.

4. We have started on a trip by car, and 50 miles from home my wife asks me if I locked the front door. I seem to remember that I did, but I don’t have a clear, detailed, confident memory impression of locking that door (and I am aware that my unclear, unconfident memory impressions have sometimes been mistaken). But, given the great inconvenience of turning back to make sure and the undesirability of worrying about it while continuing on, I decide to continue on and believe that I did lock it.

In these examples, the subject S decided to believe a certain proposition p. S did this in deciding to act, or not to act, in a certain way. In deciding to vote for acquittal, Sam decided to believe the statement of the witness. In deciding to meet Hank’s raise, Sue decides to believe that Hank is bluffing. In deciding not to remind Sam to bring the book she needed, Sally decided to believe that he would remember to bring it. In deciding to continue on down the road without worrying about it, I decided to believe that I’d locked the door. What makes true a statement of the form “In deciding to A, S decided to believe that p”? One thing required is surely this: In deciding to A, S staked something on its being the case that p. What is it to do that? I suggest the following explication:

In deciding to A, S staked something on its being the case that p if when deciding to A, S believed that A-ing was (all things considered) at least as good as other options open to her iff p (equivalently: that no other option open to her was preferable to A-ing iff p; or, for short, that A-ing was optimal iff p).

On this definition, staking something on its being the case that p is not sufficient for believing that p: The definition says only that S had a certain belief about A-ing when she decided to A, and the content of that belief does not entail that p. This is as it should be, of course. When I bet on a coin-flip landing heads, I stake something on the coin’s landing heads; and in doing this, though I may hope that it will land heads, I need not believe that it will. What more would I need to do to believe this? I would, I think, need to count on it being the case that the coin will land heads.

To count on its being the case that p is, in addition to staking something on p, to adopt a dismissive or complacent attitude toward the possibility of losing what one has staked on p because of its turning out that not-p, an attitude of a sort that the mere gambler on p does not adopt. It is to not prepare oneself for the possibility of losing what one has staked on p because of its turning out that not-p, an attitude of a sort that the mere gambler on p does not adopt. It is to not prepare oneself for the possibility of losing what one has staked on p should it turn out that not-p is a question that arises only if one has staked something on p.) If I merely staked something on the coin’s landing heads but did not count on it, then I was prepared for the possibility of its not landing heads (whether or not I was concerned or anxious about that possibility, which would depend on how much I valued what I staked on its not happening). But if I counted on its landing heads (perhaps I thought the coin was biased, or perhaps I committed the gambler’s fallacy after a string of tails), then I did not prepare myself for that possibility, at any rate not as much as I otherwise would have. To count on p is to stake something on p with this sort of dismissive or unconcerned or unready attitude toward the possibility of not-p.

In example 1, Sam might, of course, have still decided to vote for acquittal, even if he had not decided to believe the witness’s exonerating testimony, on grounds that the fact that there was such testimony gives him some reason to withhold belief in the guilt of the accused; but in doing that, he would have had to prepare himself for the possibility that the exonerating testimony was false—for example, to take the attitude that he will have no regrets should it turn out that the witness was lying and the accused was guilty—whereas in deciding to count on the truth of the witness’s testimony, he chose not to take up any such protective attitude toward the possibility
of its falsity. In example 2, Sue might not have decided to believe that Hank was bluffing—she might have withheld belief on that question—and yet still decided to risk a further bet; if she had done that, she would have been more ready than she was to find that Hank was not bluffing. In example 3, Sue might have decided not to remind Sam about the book but also not to count on his remembering it and to think about what to do should he forget it. In example 4, I might have decided to continue on without believing that I locked the door (only hoping that I did), but that would mean that I would continue to worry about the possibility that I did not lock it or at least be prepared to find it unlocked when I returned.

To not prepare oneself for dealing with the possibility of not-\( p \) is to not think about the possibility of not-\( p \) or at least not to give any consideration of what to do if not-\( p \). And in fact, since to not prepare for the possibility of not-\( p \) is itself to stake something on \( p \) (assuming that one believes that not preparing for the possibility of not-\( p \) is optimal iff \( p \)), choosing to not prepare oneself for the possibility of not-\( p \), resisting an impulse to do so, can be the choice such that it is in making it that one decides to count on \( p \).

In the right circumstances, it can take effort to avoid preparing oneself for the possibility that not-\( p \). Such efforts, to suppress considering that possibility and what to do if it is realized, are what make it apt sometimes to describe oneself as making oneself believe (or trying to make oneself believe) something. S receives a telephone call from the police saying that his wife has been involved in a car accident and that she wishes him to come to the scene. The police caller says that she believes there are no serious injuries. While S hastens to the scene, S is, as it seems natural to put it, making himself believe that his wife has not been seriously injured. Part of what \( S \) does that seems to deserve that description is to suppress all impulse to imagine what his wife’s injuries might be or to consider how he will handle it if she does find her seriously injured. (Another part is his repeatedly reminding himself of the evidence he has that she had not been seriously injured, namely, that the police caller would very likely have known and told him if there had been serious injuries.)

Counting on \( p \) typically leads to feeling surprise on learning that not-\( p \). It is a symptom of Sue’s having not prepared herself for the possibility that Hank was not bluffing that she felt surprise on learning that he was not. But it is implausible to suppose that not preparing oneself for the possibility of not-\( p \) entails that one will have a feeling of surprise if it turns out that not-\( p \). A very experienced and cool poker player might suffer no emotional reaction at all at having such a belief falsified. Of course, there is a sense of “\( S \) was surprised that not-\( p \),” which means nothing more than that \( S \) learned that not-\( p \) when she had believed that \( p \) and does not imply any feeling or emotional reaction on \( S \)’s part to learning that not-\( p \). Counting on \( p \) does entail being surprised in that sense should one learn that not-\( p \), since it entails believing that \( p \).

If counting on \( p \) is what I’ve said it is, then it is possible in the right circumstances to decide to count on \( p \) and thus to decide to believe that \( p \). Of course, it can also happen, and very frequently does, that one comes to count on (believe) something without having decided to do so. Often one’s perceptual experience or memory or beliefs about the evidence simply compel one’s counting on \( p \). But where, as occasionally happens, such things do not compel belief that \( p \) but do provide some evidence of the truth of \( p \), the opportunity may open for the subject to decide whether to believe \( p \). (In such cases, the subject’s decision may be influenced by reasons she has for wanting it to be the case that \( p \), as is illustrated in examples 3 and 4 above and of which I’ll say more later.)

So the explication of “In deciding to \( A \), \( S \) decided to believe that \( p \)” that I am suggesting is the following:

In deciding to \( A \), \( S \) decided to believe that \( p \) iff in deciding to \( A \), \( S \) decided to count on its being the case that \( p \),

where the notion of counting on its being the case that \( p \) is understood, as I’ve explained.

II

Belief is commonly thought to be a dispositional state. How do dispositions get into the picture in cases of deciding to believe like those illustrated in my examples? Well, in such cases, the subject \( S \), in deciding to believe that \( p \), simultaneously adopts and manifests the following disposition: To count on \( p \) in deciding to act in a certain way when presented with an opportunity to do so relevantly like the one she was presented with. (What is meant by “relevantly like” is that \( S \) has a similar menu of options and \( S \)’s other beliefs, desires, preferences, evaluations, and so on that bear on the question of which option will seem to her the best one to choose are similar.) What comes into being as a result of \( S \)’s deciding in a particular situation to count on \( p \) is a disposition to count on \( p \) in closely similar situations. That disposition is a dispositional belief and \( S \) decided to adopt the disposition in the very decision that first manifested it. (If one already has such a dispositional belief that \( p \), then when one encounters a relevantly similar situation and chooses to act in a way that is optimal iff \( p \), one does not therein decide anew to believe that \( p \); rather, one already regards the action’s being optimal iff \( p \) as a reason for choosing it.)

The notion of coming to have a disposition (to act in certain ways in certain sorts of situations, perhaps with a certain sort of attitude) by deciding to have it should not be problematic. This is something we often do, in deciding to have a standing policy for action, in adopting a general conditional intention to act in such-and-such a way in such-and-such circumstances.

The dispositional belief that one both manifests and decides to have, in deciding on a particular occasion to count on \( p \), could be very short-lived; but normally it will last awhile, without having to be readopted by a new decision or brought about anew in some other way, though eventually something may happen to change \( S \)’s mind (typically by providing her with a reason to decide to change it), or \( S \) may lose the belief through forgetting it.

It is possible, of course, to decide to adopt a belief-disposition, to decide to count on the truth of a certain proposition when in a certain sort of situation, in the absence of that sort situation, that is, without at the same time manifesting the disposition. That would be a case of deciding to believe that \( p \) that would not be a case of deciding to believe that \( p \) in deciding to act in a certain way.
- The disposition we've talked about so far is rather specific: to count on \( p \) in choosing a particular sort of action in a particular sort of situation. And it could be that the subject never has any more general disposition to count on \( p \). Typically, though, a disposition acquired in certain specific circumstances will generalize at least to some extent—it will be a disposition to count on \( p \) in choosing other sorts of actions in other sorts of situations.

If belief that \( p \) is the sort of disposition I've been talking about, then it may exhibit a certain sort of context-relativity. Thus, for example, Sue might be disposed to count on its being the case (i.e., believe) that Hank is bluffing when the issue is whether to meet his raise of \$20, but not disposed to count on it when the issue is whether to bet the farm. I might be disposed to count on its being the case that the temperature won't go below freezing during the next week, when the issue is whether to leave all those potted plants outside while we're away, but not disposed to count on it, when the issue is whether to leave the furnace on (with the thermostat turned down). I might be disposed to count on its being the case that this large dog won't bite someone approaching it closely when the issue is whether to assert that it won't (and thereby stake my reputation for veracity on that's being the case), but not disposed to count on the dog's not biting when the issue is whether to approach it closely myself.

That is, one might be disposed to count on \( p \) in choosing some sorts of actions in some sorts of situations but not disposed to count on \( p \) in choosing other sorts of actions in those or other sorts of situations where the value staked on \( p \) in so choosing would be different and greater. This is to believe that \( p \) relative to some contexts and not to believe it relative to other contexts. We should not insist that believing that \( p \) requires being disposed to count on \( p \) in every sort of situation. There is, to be sure, something we can call "acceptance" that is not belief. For example, it could have been that Sue merely staked something on the proposition that Hank is bluffing without counting on it: She merely took that proposition as her "betting hypothesis." But if the subject does not merely stake something on \( p \) but also counts on \( p \) in making the decision she does, then she therein manifests belief that \( p \).

In the examples given in the paragraph before last, what was at stake for the subject in the context where the subject was disposed to count on \( p \) was less than what was at stake in the context where the subject was not disposed to count on \( p \). This permits us to say that the subject believes that \( p \) only at a certain level of confidence (only to a certain degree) and not at a higher level (not to a greater degree), provided that the same relation holds between every pair of contexts such that the subject is disposed to count on \( p \) in one and not disposed to count on \( p \) in the other. And it may be that only when that relation holds is it fully rational to count on \( p \) relative to one context and not to count on it relative to another. But it surely can happen that a subject is disposed to count on \( p \) in one context but not count on it in another where what would be at stake in counting on it in the latter is not greater than what would be at stake in counting on it in the former.

George, let us suppose, is disposed to count on the rickety old footbridge's holding the weight of a large man if the issue were whether to cross the bridge himself (when he wants to get to the other side of the ravine in a hurry) but not disposed to count on it if the issue were whether to agree with his father's assertion that it will hold such a weight while discussing whether his father should have the bridge re-

built (where no one's bodily safety would be staked on his act of asserting agreement). In having the first disposition while lacking the second, George may be less than fully rational, but that is not a good reason to deny that George does believe the bridge will hold his weight relative to the first context and does not believe it relative to the second context. Here we can't say that George believes the proposition to a certain degree and not to any greater degree. We can say only that he believes it relative to one context and not relative to another or that "in a way" he believes it and in a way he doesn't.36

L. J. Cohen has offered the following account of belief:

belief that \( p \) is a disposition, when one is attending to issues raised, or items referred to, by the proposition that \( p \), normally to feel it true that \( p \) and false that non-\( p \), whether or not one is willing to act, speak, or reason accordingly. . . . The standard way to discover whether you believe that \( p \) is by introspecting whether you are normally disposed to feel that \( p \) when you consider the issue.

This, if I understand it right, entails that belief is not relative to context, to types of choice situation, in the way I've described. But I find it implausible to suppose that one has a special feeling literally so called, toward a proposition one believes whenever one considers it. (The attitude toward \( p \) of counting on it, of not taking seriously the possibility that not-\( p \), on which I place so much weight, is not a feeling, and it is possible only when one has staked something on \( p \).)

Cohen's theory seems prompted, at least partly, by the fact that we are quite good at distinguishing among the propositions we entertain between those we currently believe and those we do not currently believe, plus the thought that this cannot be explained if belief is the kind of disposition to action that a pragmatic account says it is. But we need not accept this latter thought: Insofar as we have direct knowledge of what our beliefs are, when we are not manifesting them, it is of the same sort as we have of our conditional intentions. I have a kind of privileged access to my own conditional intentions—to the fact that, unless my intentions were to change, I would act in such-and-such ways in such-and-such circumstances. I have the same kind of privileged access to at least some of my beliefs, to at least some of the facts about me of the form "Unless my beliefs were to change, I would count on \( p \) in such-and-such circumstances."

Of course, we are not infallible about facts of this sort about ourselves. I might be aware of the fact that I would count on this dog's being harmless in circumstances where, by asserting that this dog is harmless, I would be staking my testimonial veracity on its being harmless, but unaware of the fact that I would not count on its being harmless in other circumstances where, by approaching the dog closely, I would be staking my bodily safety on its being harmless.

Though one can come to have a belief, a disposition to count on the truth of a proposition, by deciding to have it, one can, of course, and often does, come to have such a disposition in other ways, involuntarily. For instance, in the normal case, one's perceptual beliefs—one's beliefs as to what one is now seeing, hearing, feeling, and so on (at least insofar as the content has to do with the more superficial, perceivable features of what one perceives)—will be involuntary. When I see a tree or a dog before me, a car coming down the street, snow on the ground, and the like, and as a result
come to believe that I see such a thing, I do not (usually) experience the coming to be of that belief as something I have a choice about and decide to make happen. There could, however, be an atypical situation where I have some reason, though not a conclusive reason, to think that my senses might currently be deceiving me; then I might be in a position to decide whether to believe what my senses deliver.

Similarly, most of my beliefs based on memory, where I believe something because it seems to me I remember witnessing it or learning it, are not voluntary. Unlike my example where I decide to trust my memory impression that I did lock the door, I do not decide to trust my memory impression that I ate breakfast at home this morning, that I had lunch with S yesterday, that I have been in New Zealand, and so on. In most cases where I believe because I remember, my memory does not leave me free to decide whether to trust it. It is fairly clear that in the large mass of beliefs held by any normal person at a given time, the overwhelmingly major part will have come about involuntarily and only a small portion will have been adopted voluntarily (by decision). Coming to believe by deciding to believe (or seeming to do so) is undoubtedly a rare phenomenon in that sense. But it is nevertheless a phenomenon that we are familiar with—it may happen every day in the lives of some of us—and that is why we find it intelligible, when judging whether a particular belief was justified, to think of ourselves as judging whether the believer ought to have chosen to adopt the belief or ought to have done so if she could have done otherwise.

I do not wish to claim that every dispositional belief must consist of the sort of disposition that I have specified. I claim only that having such a disposition with respect to a certain proposition suffices for believing that proposition. There may be phenomena that we are happy to call beliefs that do not fit this analysis. For example, there can be belief in a proposition p such that there could be for the believer no such thing as its turning out that not-p (no such thing, that is, as her coming to have conclusive or overwhelming evidence that not-p) and thus no such thing as her preparing herself for that possibility or her staking something on its being the case that p. That there is life elsewhere in our galaxy might, for instance, be such a proposition. (I'm inclined to think that such propositions can be believed only in an attenuated sense.)

Where believing that p is the sort of disposition I have been talking about, a reason for believing that p will be a reason for being disposed to act in such a way that in so acting, one counts on its being the case that p. The reasons one can have for doing this fall into two mutually exclusive classes: the interested and the disinterested. An interested reason is a reason for wanting it to be the case that p. Thus I had interested reasons for believing that I locked the door, and S for believing that his wife was not seriously injured in the car accident. A disinterested reason is one that is not interested. Disinterested reasons will include having evidence that p or having perceptual experience whose content entails that p (while having no reason to mistrust one's senses in that instance).

How can there be an interested reason for believing that p? How can wanting it to be the case that p be a reason for believing that p? Can wanting it to be the case that p be a reason for taking something on p? Clearly not when one believes that not-p. But suppose one has no belief either way. Then I think a desire that p can motivate, further, one's staking something on p: It can motivate one's not preparing oneself for the possibility of not-p, that is, one's counting on p. (To not prepare oneself for the possibility of not-p, to count on not p, can itself be to stake something on p; that is, it can be that one's counting on p is optimal iff p.) For example, suppose that S's husband was scheduled to be on a flight that, S has learned, has crashed; but he telephoned S an hour before the flight was to leave to say that he thought he would probably not make that flight and would come on a later one. S's desire that her husband was not on the ill-fated flight is about as strong as any desire she's ever had. In the circumstances, it would not be surprising if, because of it, she began to count on its being the case that he was not on that flight, began to believe that he was not; and her doing so would not even be, all things considered, irrational.

Or suppose a subject S has decided to stake on the truth of a certain proposition p something other than not being prepared for the possibility of not-p (e.g., a large sum of money). Then S's having done this gives S a reason for wanting it to be the case that p, and it is intelligible that this desire might motivate S to take the further step involved in counting on (and thus believing) p, viz., to not prepare herself for the possibility of not-p, to not contemplate the costs should it turn out that not-p. One would expect this desire actually to lead a normally rational person to count on p only when the stake is rather significant and the person has some evidence that p and no compelling evidence that not-p. Suppose, for example, that S has a life-threatening disease. There are two treatments available, for each of which there is some reason to think it might bring about a cure in S's case: Each has worked in some cases and failed to work in some. But the treatments are mutually exclusive: Pursuing either makes it impossible to pursue the other. S decides to pursue treatment A. Now S has reason for wanting it to be the case that treatment A is the better cure for her case or at least that treatment A is as likely to cure her as treatment B would have been. It would not be surprising if this desire led S to believe this, to count on its being so, to avoid the psychic cost of taking seriously the possibility that it is not so.

Coming to believe that p by deciding to do so seems more psychologically possible, and less irrational (all things considered), when the subject has some evidence that p (but it is not compelling evidence, or she also has some noncompelling evidence that not-p) and also has significant reason for wanting it to be the case that p.

IV

But some philosophers have thought that deciding to believe is not so much as conceptually possible, let alone psychologically possible. According to Bernard Williams, "it is not a contingent fact that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I believe something..." He offers two reasons for this claim:

One reason is connected with the characteristic of beliefs that they aim at truth. If I could acquire a belief at will, I could acquire it whether it was true or not; moreover I would know that I could acquire it whether it was true or not. If in full consciousness I could will to acquire a 'belief' irrespective of its truth, it is unclear that before the
event I could seriously think of it as a belief, i.e., as something purporting to represent reality. At the very least, there must be a restriction on what is the case after the event; since I could not then, in full consciousness, regard this as a belief of mine, i.e., something I take to be true, and also know that I acquired it at will. (1973, p. 148)

Williams says that it is a characteristic of beliefs, presumably a characteristic that is essential to their nature, that they aim at truth. And he asserts that, if I could acquire a belief at will, I could acquire it whether it was true or not, which would be contrary to the nature of belief. What does Williams mean by “I could acquire it whether it was true or not”? (He can’t mean that I could acquire a belief that is not true. Entailing that possibility would be nothing against acquiring beliefs at will, since we do actually acquire beliefs that are not true.) What does he mean by “beliefs aim at truth”? One might naturally take this to mean that, necessarily, one wants one’s beliefs to be true, and thus “I could acquire it whether it was true or not” would mean that I could acquire it without caring at all whether it was true or not, without having any desire that it be true. If its consequent is construed this way, then there is no reason to accept Williams’ conditional, “if I could acquire a belief at will, I could acquire it whether it was true or not.”

Suppose it is conceptually true that one cannot come to believe something while lacking any desire that one’s belief be true. This is quite compatible with its being the case that one’s reason for deciding to believe that p is a desire that p be true—a desire it had independently of having evidence that p is true. Suppose that S has some evidence that her husband was on the plane that recently crashed and some evidence that he was not; but instead of withholding belief, S believes that her husband was not on the plane, because she wants it very much to be true that he wasn’t. This desire is not a sort of evidence that he wasn’t on the plane, but it does have to do with the truth of that proposition. It is precisely because she does want so much that the proposition be true that she is motivated to believe it. So it is obviously not the case that deciding to believe, for an interested reason, entails not caring whether one’s belief is true or not.

There is another way of construing “beliefs aim at truth.” One might say that one cannot believe that p unless one’s counting on p is motivated by a desire to have true beliefs (a desire to count on a proposition’s being true only when it is true) that is independent of any desire one has regarding any particular proposition that it be true, or, in other words, unless one has disinterested reason for believing it. This is perhaps the most plausible construal of Williams’ meaning and of the meaning of other writers who have invoked this dictum about belief. (Given that we must have a desire for true beliefs in general that is independent of the content of any particular belief, there can arise cases where one has a belief that, qua belief, one of course wants to be true, but that, qua having the particular content it does, one wants to be false. If the wife in our recent example, after acquiring compelling new evidence, came to believe that her husband was on the plane that crashed, then she would be in such a position.)

If “beliefs aim at truth” is construed in this way, then, although I see no reason to think that it captures a conceptual truth about belief as such, it may well express a conceptual truth about rational belief. And we may grant further that it is psychologically impossible to believe a proposition, to count on its truth, without having some disinterested reason for doing so. But from its being psychologically impos-

sible to believe without disinterested reasons, it does not follow that it is psychologically impossible to decide to believe for such reasons.

And from its being conceptually impossible to believe rationally without disinterested reasons, it does not follow that it is conceptually impossible to decide to believe for such reasons. It may be that cases where some of S’s reasons for deciding to believe that p are interested ones should be said to exhibit a degree of epistemic irrationality, by which we would mean simply that some of S’s reasons are non-evidential, are not such as to increase the probability that p is true. But cases of deciding to believe need not all be cases where interested reasons are involved; some cases where none are involved might be cases where the decision to believe that p is, even epistemically, fully rational, where the subject’s disinterested reasons do justify counting on p in the context. In example 1 above, Sam’s disinterested reasons might be good enough to justify his counting on the truth of the exonerating witness’s testimony, even though they do not compel him to do so: Whether having certain evidence compels a belief is not the criterion of whether having that evidence justifies the belief.

Another reason Williams offers (1973, pp. 148–49), for his claim that it is non-contingently true that I cannot come to believe just by deciding to do so,

stems from our considerations about perceptual belief: a very central idea with regard to empirical belief is that of coming to believe that p because it is so, that is, the relation between a man’s perceptual environment, his perceptions, and the beliefs that result. Unless a concept satisfies the demands of that notion, namely, that we can understand the idea that he comes to believe that p because it is so and because his perceptual organs are working, it will not be the concept of empirical belief . . . But a state that could be produced at will would not satisfy these demands, because there would be no regular connexion between the environment, the perceptions and what the man came out with, which is a necessary condition of a belief . . .

Williams here seems to claim that, from the proposition that S’s belief that p is a correct perceptual belief, it follows that S’s belief was caused by the fact that p in a way that is incompatible with the supposition that S came to believe that p by deciding to believe it. I am unable to understand how this is so.

Suppose that S’s eyes are directed toward a square red patch on a white wall. The light is good and S’s visual system is in good working order, so she is caused to have a visual experience as if seeing a square red patch on a white surface, and in fact she sees a square red patch on a white surface. Suppose, however, that she hesitates for a moment to believe that she sees such a thing because she has some slight reason to think that she might be hallucinating the red patch; but then she decides to cast doubt aside and trust her vision: She decides to believe that (R) there is before her a red patch on a white surface.

Here we can certainly say that she came to her belief that R because it was a fact that R and her vision was in good working order: Had these things not been the case, she would not have had the visual experience, she had, and had she not had that experience she would not have believed that R. We cannot, it is true, say that the fact that R together with the fact that her vision was working properly causally necessitated her believing that R. But we should not, in any case, want to say that. Some-
times people do mistrust their senses when they are in fact working properly. So I see no reason to accept Williams' claim that, if a person with properly working perceptual organs perceives a certain external scene and as a result has a perceptual belief that corresponds to her perceptual experience, then it could not be that she decided whether to adopt that belief. 9

V

William P. Alston (1988) attacks the thesis that it is psychologically possible for one to "take up at will whatever propositional attitude one chooses" (p. 122). This is not a thesis I have asserted or wish to assert. Obviously, there are a great many propositions I do not now believe that I cannot come to believe just by deciding to believe them. For example, it is not in my power now to decide to believe that I am now playing squash or that I'm now immersed in water. Obviously, there are also a great many propositions I now believe that I cannot cease to believe just by deciding to do so. For example, I cannot now decide not to believe that the current year is 1999 or that I was born in Wyoming. (But note that it is also not in my power now to acquire, just by deciding, the intention to run over pedestrians with my car at the next opportunity and not in my power to abandon my intention always to avoid driving my car into the path of onrushing vehicles; and intention is unquestionably a sort of mental state that a subject sometimes comes to have just by deciding to do so.)

But in the course of arguing against this obviously false thesis, Alston makes plain that he also rejects a weaker thesis that I do wish to assert, namely, that it is psychologically possible, in the right circumstances, for a subject to come to believe something just by deciding to believe it, where the subject has it open to her also to not come to believe it. He is convinced that, in any actual case that anyone might be tempted to describe by saying that a person came to believe that p just by deciding to do so, what really happened must be something else. It must be either that its seeming to the subject that it is highly likely that p compelled the subject's belief (leaving her no choice in the matter) or that what the subject decided to do was, not to believe that p, but to proceed on the assumption that p.

It is certainly true that there are various cases properly described as deciding to proceed on the assumption that p that are not cases of deciding to believe that p. One of them is the case of staking something on its being the case that p without counting on it (in my sense)—as in ordinary gambling or in Alston's example (1998, p. 126) of the military commander who says, "I don't know what the disposition of enemy forces is; I don't even have enough information to make an educated guess. But I have to proceed on some basis or other, so I'll just assume that it is H and make my plans accordingly." Another is the case of assuming that p as a hypothesis for the purpose of testing it or of reducing it to absurdity, where one does not even stake anything on the truth of the hypothesis.

But the cases I want to describe as deciding to believe are not of those sorts. In deciding to believe the exonerating witness's testimony and vote for acquittal, Sam decided not merely to proceed on the assumption that the witness's testimony was true, but to count on it as being true. When the question arose as to whether I locked the door, I might have decided merely to stake something on the hypothesis that I did, merely to proceed on that assumption, but I decided to do more, to believe that I locked it, to adopt an attitude toward that proposition that is not implied by my merely staking something on its truth.

If they are not cases of merely proceeding on the assumption that p, must they then be cases of the other sort Alston allows, where the subject did come to believe that p but, despite the subject's impression of deciding to do so, she actually had no choice about the matter and was compelled to believe (by, say, her probability estimate)? I suppose that it is possible that I and others are always victims of a kind of illusion about what is going on in our minds here—I do not want to claim that would be conceptually or psychologically impossible—but we have not been offered any good reason to think it is so. Until we are offered such a reason, we are entitled to continue taking our occasional impressions, that we come to believe something just by deciding to do so, at face value. And that means, concerning the concept of epistemic justification, that we can continue, in good conscience, to understand it in a deontic way: We can continue to take the judgment that a belief is not justified as implying that the subject ought not to have adopted the belief or ought not to have done so if she could have avoided it. 10

Notes
3. But the definins, in ascribing the belief that A-ing is optimal iff p, does entail that the subject understands the proposition that p.
4. The idea that belief is a disposition to act in certain ways is commonly labeled the "pragmatic" account of belief. See, for example, Brazitkaitis (1932) and Stalnaker (1984).
5. I think that Michael Bratman is not disagreeing with what I say here when he says: Reasonable belief is, in an important way, context independent: at any one time a reasonable agent normally either believes something (to degree m) or does not believe it (to that degree). She does not at the same time believe that p relative to one context but not relative to another. (Bratman 1992, 3)
6. The last sentence here does not disagree with what I've said if it means that a fully rational person does not at the same time believe that p to a certain degree relative to one context but does not believe it to that same degree relative to another.
7. Robert Stalnaker (1984) holds that belief is a species of a broader genus he calls acceptance and suggests that context-relativity is unproblematic only for acceptance that is not belief. He says (p. 81), "A person may accept something in one context, while rejecting it or suspending judgment in another. There need be no conflict that must be resolved when the difference is noticed, and he need not change his mind when he moves from one context to the other. But something is wrong if I have separate incompatible sets of beliefs for different circumstances." This last assertion seems right only if "incompatible beliefs" means (as I trust Stalnaker does mean) beliefs with incompatible contents. I don't see that there is anything wrong or irrational about believing something relative to one context and not believing it (as distinct from believing it false) relative to another.
8. Something like this construal of "beliefs aim at truth" is suggested by David Velleman in "On the Aim of Belief" (unpublished ms.).
9. For a very different, but very interesting, critique of Williams's argument, see Bennett (1990).

10. I am grateful to Matthias Steup for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

References


