PENULTIMATE DRAFT: see *Ratio* for published version

**Intending, believing, and supposing at will**

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Abstract

In this paper I consider an argument for the possibility of intending at will, and its relationship to an argument about the possibility of believing at will. I argue that although we have good reason to think we sometimes intend at will, we lack good reason to think this in the case of believing. Instead of believing at will, agents like us often suppose at will.

Keywords: intention, belief, supposition, intending at will, believing at will

1 INTRODUCTION

Here I will be concerned with questions about whether it is possible to form intentions at will, about whether it is possible to form beliefs at will, and about whether an argument addressing intending at will transfers to the possibility of believing at will. The motivation for doing so is straightforward. Belief and intention are central propositional attitudes. Understanding their relation to the will is of critical importance for understanding their nature, for understanding the scope of the will, and thus for understanding the structure of the mind more broadly.

When I speak of forming intentions and beliefs ‘at will,’ I have in mind a specific kind of event involving intentional mental action. In the case of intention, it is the intentional formation of an intention to A. For example, an agent may be confronted with three options, none of which seems obviously best and none of which automatically triggers a relevant intention. If the agent forms an intention at will, she intentionally selects and commits to one of the options, thereby forming the relevant intention. Moreover, she does so in a causally direct way – she does not form the intention by intentionally doing something else that has, as a byproduct, the formation of the intention. In the case of belief, believing at will is the intentional mental action of forming a belief that p. For example, an agent may wonder whether it is the case that p. If she believes that p at will, this is because – perhaps after a period of reflection regarding evidence – she moves from a state of not believing that p to a state of believing that p by performing an intentional mental action of belief formation in a causally direct way. Note that the issue here is not whether intention or belief formation might be said to be voluntary in some sense that does not involve intentional mental action (as in, e.g., Montmarquet (1986), Nickel (2010)). Thus, my use of ‘at will’ is stipulative, and does not rule out the existence of other interesting senses of the notion.[[1]](#footnote-1) Nonetheless, I think this is one interesting and important sense of the notion[[2]](#footnote-2), concerning whether we can, via intentional mental actions, move directly from a state of not intending or believing p, to a state of intending or believing p.

Why think this is an interesting and important sense of ‘at will’? First, I find some intrinsic interest in the questions raised here. For these questions concern the scope and limits of our control over central aspects of our mental life. Second, it is very plausible that answers to the questions raised here will have downstream implications for the ethics of intending and believing. I say this while agreeing with Conor McHugh (2017) that we can hold agents responsible for what they believe even if they lack the capacity to form beliefs at will in the sense at issue here. But the limits of our capacities provide contours for our practices of holding agents responsible. So whether we can intend or believe at will in the direct sense at issue may have important implications for the circumstances under which agents might be held responsible, as well as for the degree to which agents might be judged responsible for the formation of beliefs or intentions (Coates and Swenson 2013).

In the literature on intending and believing at will, two forms of possibility are sometimes at issue. The first is conceptual possibility. If intending or believing at will is conceptually impossible, it is because something in the very concept of belief or intention, or in the very concept of what it is to be a believer or intender, is incompatible with these states being formed at will. It is generally accepted that there is no conceptual problem with intending at will. I do not focus on this question, though considerations to follow will illuminate good reasons behind this consensus. Regarding the conceptual possibility of believing at will, philosophers are divided. So this question will require some attention. In the end, I will side with those who find believing at will conceptually possible. However, I accept that the matter remains controversial. My main aim is to consider a second form of possibility: psychological possibility.

I take psychological possibility to involve the idea that intending or believing at will is something we – those with human or very much human-like psychologies – can do. On the question of whether human agents could intend or believe at will, philosophers disagree. In section 2 I introduce an argument that gives us some reason to think we can form intentions at will. In section 3 I examine whether an analogue of this argument transfers to the case of believing. I argue that it does not. Instead of believing at will, agents like us often suppose at will. In section 4 I examine an interesting objection, but ultimately find it wanting. The upshot is that while we have good reason to believe intending at will is psychologically possible for agents like us, these reasons do not transfer to the case of believing at will. In this paper’s conclusion, I consider the broader philosophical significance of this result.

2 INTENDING AT WILL

Is it psychologically possible for human agents to form intentions at will? It has to be said that the majority of philosophers of action think the answer is yes. Consensus seems to be that human beings have the ability to decide what to do by performing the intentional mental action of forming an intention (Frankfurt 1988; Kane 1996; McCann 1998; Searle 2001; Clarke 2003; Mele 2003).

Consensus has been challenged, however (Strawson 2003; Wu 2013; Vierkant 2015). And in fact it is harder than one might think to explain how events of intention formation can be understood as intentional mental actions. For consider the following problem.[[3]](#footnote-3) Most intentional actions are guided to completion by (among other things) the content of relevant intentions. When I intend to walk to the store, for example, the content of my intention typically includes a plan that involves my route. Even if my original intention to walk to the store does not include a detailed plan, this intention helps to sustain and guide my further deliberation and elaboration of the intention to walk to the store. But the intentions that guide decision-making are importantly different. These are standardly thought to be *intentions to decide what to do*. And the content of such an intention is open-ended with respect to its satisfaction. The intention itself does not specify what decision would satisfy it – indeed, many potential decisions may qualify. So the intention itself offers very little guidance regarding how the decision is to be made.

One might take this problem to motivate skepticism regarding intending at will. On the skeptical view, events of intention formation are never intentional actions (although they may qualify as the final part of extended intentional actions of deliberation). This is because agents lack the ability to form intentions at will. Instead, agents form intentions by way of partially automatic and sub-personal processes of assessment and deliberation. Certainly agents can actively direct deliberation in certain ways, but the skeptic maintains that the event of intention formation is not up to the agent in the same way. Instead, the event of intention formation is somehow determined by processes deemed ‘ballistic’ (Strawson 2003), ‘automatic’ (Wu 2013), or inaccessible to introspection or consciousness (Carruthers 2007; Vierkant 2015). And to this claim, the skeptic adds a further one (which I do not question here): causation by these processes is claimed to render the event of intention formation non-intentional, or anyways not ‘at will.’

But I think we need not acquiesce to skepticism.[[4]](#footnote-4) Begin with the thought that an agent deliberates when she is uncertain about what to do. This deliberation is guided to a certain extent by the agent’s intention to decide what to do. Such intentions are often more specific, taking on various practical constraints – e.g., desires, goals, needs, promises, commitments, cares, prior intentions – that stem from the particular circumstances at hand. One important feature of deliberation is that it embeds a commitment to terminate deliberation by forming an intention at an appropriate moment.

A second important feature of deliberation is that in deliberating, the agent frequently performs a range of intentional mental actions, and does so in a skilled way: agents are skilled at deliberation. Deliberation can be seen as partially constituted by these skilled mental actions, or by what we might call cognitive control operations – directing attention, querying memory, contrasting and comparing options, envisioning alternative futures, etc. Many of these are clearly operations agents can intentionally perform. Should we see intention formation as one such mental operation?

Two reasons to answer in the affirmative stem from consideration of the potential usefulness of such an operation for agents like us. First, consider that deliberation is often time-constrained. We deliberate in order to canvass our options, to imagine alternative futures, and to make better decisions. But deliberation can rarely go on indefinitely. It is often the case that we must decide now. The world enforces this constraint even when we would like more time to deliberate. So what do we do in such circumstances? An inability to decide will mean inactivity, or prolonged deliberation, at crucial moments. It would thus be useful if, faced with such circumstances, we could exercise an ability to form an intention at will.

The second reason stems from the claim that agents involved in practical deliberation are faced with conditions of *practical permissiveness*. Jonathan Way (2007) has observed that when practically deliberating there is often no clear answer to a question about what action-option is uniquely favored by one’s reasons. Way highlights a number of relevant case-types, including choice between equally good options, choice between ‘incommensurable options,’ choice involving uncertainty regarding the strength of one’s reasons for one or many options, choice ‘for no reason,’ choice on the basis of a judgment that an option is ‘in the relevant respect good enough,’ even though some other option ‘would be in that respect better,’ and more (pp. 227-228).

Thus, the conditions confronting *practically* deliberating agents are often conditions of practical permissiveness in the following sense. An agent is often permitted to form one of a number of intentions while remaining practically rational – often one’s practical reasons do not determine a single best option, but perhaps a cluster. Given this, the ability to intend at will could, if possessed, often play a crucial role in moving the agent from the unsettled state to a state of commitment to a rationally permissible option. Given conditions of practical permissiveness, agents without the ability to form an intention at will may often find themselves practically stuck. In such circumstances, possession of this ability would clearly be useful.

At this point a worry arises regarding Kavka’s (1983) Toxin Puzzle.[[5]](#footnote-5) In general form, the puzzle is generated by cases in which an agent is given a very good reason (say, a lot of money) to form the intention to A right now, in spite of her knowledge that there is no reason to – or positive reason against – actually A-ing (say, because A-ing is drinking a toxin tomorrow, and the payout for forming the intention will occur before then). There are various reactions to this puzzle. As a referee notes, some philosophers have taken the puzzle to indicate that intending at will is impossible. Conor McHugh asserts, for example, that a moral of the puzzle is

[T]hat we are not, in our intendings, reactive to any kind of reason that we can recognize as favoring having certain intentions . . . we are very restricted in our reactivity to reasons that do not favor acting in one way or another, but merely favor intending to act in one way or another . . . Intentions are not reasons-reactive in the way that actions are. (2014, p. 14)

McHugh goes on to claim that ‘freedom of intention is a form of freedom that we exercise otherwise than through voluntary control’ (p. 15).

Now, there are a few moving parts in McHugh’s specific account, and I do not wish to put words in his mouth. So let me ask: does Kavka’s puzzle problematize the view that we can sometimes intend at will – in my sense of ‘at will’? For at least two reasons, the answer is no. The first is that in the normal case, where our reasons for intending to A line up with our reasons for A-ing, it remains possible to intentionally form an intention to A. The conditions of practical permissiveness I have discussed will often present agents with reasons for intending and acting in various ways – nothing about the alignment of reasons undermines the intentionality of the formationof an intention in such cases.

This is all I really need. But the second reason may be worth mentioning. It is that the implications McHugh and others draw from the toxin puzzle are mistaken. Mele (1995) and Clarke (2007) offer a range of cases that undermine the view that, as Mele has it, ‘Reasons for intending to A that are not also reasons for A-ing cannot play a deliberative role in the formation of an intention to A,’ (1995, p. 85), or as Clarke has it, ‘any justifying reason for deciding to A, and any justifying reason for coming to intend to A, must be, once the decision is made or the intention acquired, a justifying reason for A-ing’ (2007, p. 394). I briefly describe one of Mele’s and one of Clarke’s cases in the following footnote – interested readers can see more in the cited papers.[[6]](#footnote-6) The falsity of these theses undermines any move from Kavka’s puzzle to the claim that we cannot intend at will.

I have offered two reasons for thinking that the ability to intend at will would be a useful thing for agents like us to possess. I doubt that either reason (or even both in combination) is sufficient to *compel* the view that intending at will is psychologically possible for agents like us. But I do think these reasons render this psychological possibility very plausible. If one agrees, there is motivation to ask whether the argument or the implementation transfers to believing at will. Examining this question might reveal important similarities or differences in the relation of the will to intentions on the one hand, and to beliefs on the other.

3 BELIEVING AT WILL

When deliberating about what to do the agent typically wants to know what is best to do, or at least what she most wants to do. When deliberating about what is the case the agent wants to know what is the case. One might think the kinds of reasons that come in for assessment are quite different in the two cases. Nonetheless, there are some structural similarities between processes that lead to intention and those that lead to belief. The claim that practical deliberation is a skill seems to transfer cleanly to theoretical deliberation about what is the case. Agents know how to engage in theoretical deliberation, and deploy a range of skilled mental operations when doing so. Additionally, the claim that practical deliberation embeds a commitment to terminating deliberation in response to sufficient reason seems to transfer. When deliberating about what is the case, agents are implicitly committed to terminating deliberation in response to sufficient reason to believe that p is the case.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Our question, at this point, is the following. Might it be useful for an agent to possess the ability to terminate theoretical deliberation at will by forming a belief? Before attempting to answer this question, it is worth observing that the usefulness argument as I have offered it concerns psychological possibility. The conceptual possibility of intending at will was taken for granted. We cannot do this, however, regarding believing at will. This is because while consensus holds that intending at will is conceptually possible, most philosophers hold the opposite regarding belief.

In the recent literature this view can be traced to Bernard Williams’s (1973) classic paper. Williams claims that I could not simultaneously, ‘in full consciousness,’ regard something ‘as a belief of mine, i.e. something I take to be true,’ and also regard that thing as ‘something I acquired at will’ (1973, p. 148). A major constraint in Williams’s argument is that these beliefs formed ‘at will’ are beliefs formed irrespective of their truth. With this constraint in place, Williams’s argument is very plausible. For, as Williams stresses, a core characteristic of beliefs is that they aim at the truth. Mental states formed *irrespective* of the truth of their objects would seem to be something other than beliefs.

However, a recent line of argument in favor of the conceptual possibility of believing at will accepts Williams’s constraint. Those that take this line concede what Philip Nickel calls ‘a strong form of evidentialism, according to which belief always commits one to the judgment that there is evidence’ (2010, p. 313). Conceding this much, these voluntarists locate their arguments with respect to circumstances that allow *discretion*. As Kurt Sylvan puts the thought: ‘There are cases where it would be epistemically rational for a person either to believe p or to be agnostic on p given her total evidence E’ (2016, p. 1637). Notice, then, an analogy with the argument I offered for intending at will. I emphasized conditions of practical permissiveness facing practical deliberators. This line of argument emphasizes conditions of epistemic permissiveness facing theoretical deliberators.

Rik Peels offers a version of this line of argument that turns on a certain kind of case. Peels asks us to imagine the existence of a highly accurate mind-reading machine piloted by Dr. Transparent. In the case,

Dr. Transparent sincerely promises me that, if I come to believe within a minute that he will give me $10, he will give me $10, and that, if I do not come to believe within a minute that he will give me $10, he will not give me $10. (Peels 2015, p. 529).

Peels wants the $10, is ‘introspectively aware’ that he lacks the relevant belief, and realizes that ‘if I acquire the belief, I will most likely receive the reward and, therefore, hold a true belief.’ According to Peels, then, ‘Since I desire to receive $10, I choose to believe that I will receive $10. I realize that I hold this belief because I have chosen to acquire it; but that does not undermine my belief that I will receive $10’ (p. 529).

What is at issue for Peels is whether it is conceptually possible to form a belief at will. To show this, Peels does not need to offer an account of the psychological mechanism responsible for such a process. He simply needs to show that an agent could form a belief-like cognitive state at will without violating conceptual constraints on what it is for a cognitive state to be a belief, or on what it is for an agent to be a believer. The chief constraint featuring in Williams’s argument, recall, was that belief aims at the truth. And, as Peels observes, an agent who realizes that if she forms the belief that p then p will be true, and that if she fails to form the belief that p then p will not be true, is an agent who realizes she is rationally permitted to believe p or not. Assuming it is somehow psychologically possible for this agent, all she then needs to do is exercise the relevant ability, and form the belief at will.

This will be controversial, but I think Peels has done enough to show that it is conceptually possible to form a rationally permitted belief at will. There may well be decisive replies to Peels (although Peels himself offers a good discussion of several). But I propose moving on, in order to ask questions about psychological possibility. Unconvinced readers can read what follows conditionally: if believing at will is conceptually possible, what reasons might we have to think it is psychologically possible for agents like us?

Peels’s case depends on conditions of epistemic permissiveness. Do such conditions support not only a claim about conceptual possibility, but also a claim about psychological possibility? It has to be said that Peels has given us an argument that believing at will is conceptually possible in *very special circumstances*. Not many prospective beliefs will be true if only we come to possess them. If we require circumstances this special in order to form rationally permitted beliefs at will, then the ability to do so would not seem very useful to agents like us.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In my view, this is inherent to the types of cases at issue. Conditions of epistemic permissiveness are conditions in which, as Sylvan put it, ‘it would be epistemically rational for a person either to believe p or to be agnostic on p given her total evidence E.’ Such conditions are much rarer than the conditions of practical permissiveness we routinely face. So, in my view, the analogue of this part of my argument regarding intentions does not transfer.

But one might disagree. Perhaps I have too stringent a view on how much evidence one needs before it is epistemically rational for one to believe p. Perhaps, that is, we are in conditions of epistemic permissiveness all the time. This seems to be Nickel’s assumption when he offers the following case.

Suppose I have lived for three years in an area where I have never heard the sound of a train, although I have observed some seemingly unused train tracks. I do not know whether the train tracks have fallen into disrepair. One morning, as I am working, I hear the sound of a train whistle, and I feel the distinctive vibration of a locomotive. (Nickel 2010, p. 313)

Nickel asserts that one’s reasons in this case permit belief that there is a locomotive, as well as the absence of a belief that there is a locomotive. I do not know whether that is right, but I grant it. Would forming a belief at will in Nickel’s broader conditions of epistemic permissiveness ever prove useful? Certainly in many such cases this seems dubious. If one’s evidence is insufficient to compel belief, why not rest content with agnosticism? That the formation of the belief is (I am granting) rational says little about whether such a formation would be useful.

Here is where the further reason I discussed regarding intentions – the existence of time constraints – becomes relevant to the case of believing at will. Interestingly, while discussing when agents in epistemically permissive circumstances might rationally close theoretical deliberation, Nickel himself offers a usefulness argument:

There are practical limitations on inquiry, and for this reason a question can be closed due to pragmatic considerations inherent in the situation. The subject can legitimately come to believe a proposition on the basis of whatever evidence he has for it when inquiry is rightly closed. (p. 316)

There may be other kinds of pragmatic considerations inherent in a situation, but in my view the most pressing is a lack of time. So consider an agent pressed for time. For practical reasons, she needs to come to believe p. But her evidence is inadequate to compel belief. Somewhat famously, William James offers a vivid example of our case-type.

Suppose, for instance, that you are climbing a mountain, and have worked yourself into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap. Have faith that you can successfully make it, and your feet are nerved to its accomplishment. But mistrust yourself, and think of all the sweet things you have heard the scientists say of maybes, and you will hesitate so long that, at last, all unstrung and trembling, and launching yourself in a moment of despair, you roll in the abyss. In such a case (and it belongs to an enormous class), the part of wisdom as well as of courage is to *believe what is in the line of your needs*, for only by such belief is the need fulfilled. Refuse to believe, and you shall indeed be right, for you shall irretrievably perish. But believe, and again you shall be right, for you shall save yourself. You make one or the other of two possible universes true by your trust or mistrust, both universes having been only *maybes*, in this particular, before you contributed your act. (1897, p. 57)

This case is of course similar to Peels’s in a way, although here the stakes are higher, and the construction more ecologically valid. What should we think of the case? Perhaps realization of [a] the connection between faith and success, and of [b] the fact that if one believes in success, the belief will turn out true, permits one to form the belief at will.

In response, it is not clear that possession of the ability to form a belief at will would be useful here in the same way that possession of an ability to form an intention can be. The reason is that an alternate operation is available to the agent. In cases of uncertainty, one can simply suppose. (This much is consistent with James’s use of the term faith.) In this case, one may suppose (or have faith that) one will succeed, and act under that supposition. So long as the supposition plays a functional role similar to the one that the belief would have, supposition is all that is required.

Admittedly, this is an empirical claim. It may be that beliefs make important differences in one’s acting that suppositions do not. My empirical bet, here, is that the profile of supposition and belief is similar enough in such cases to undermine the usefulness of believing at will (for some inconclusive evidence that trends in a friendly direction – regarding the role of imagination in guiding action, see Van Leeuwen 2011). Accordingly, my suggestion is that even in cases involving time constraints and epistemic permissiveness, agents need not believe at will: supposing at will is sufficient to meet their needs. In conversation, friends and philosophers have asked about the nature of supposition and its aptness to replace belief in some cases of action guidance. So let me be clear. First, I am not claiming that in supposing, one replaces all beliefs. One’s suppositions will interact with a range of background beliefs. One point of supposing is to slot in a needed contentful state apt for factoring in prospective and conditionalized practical and theoretical reasoning – reasoning that depends on beliefs. Second, although the nature of supposition is a topic of philosophical dispute, all of the leading candidates are apt to replace belief in some cases of action guidance. These candidates hold that supposition is a kind of imagination – either a kind of belief-like, propositional form of imagination, or imagining-that (see Goldman 2006 and Weinberg & Meskin 2006 for different versions), or a kind of acceptance-like form of cognitive imagination (Arcangeli 2014). Importantly, these accounts are agreed that supposition is not belief. And these accounts all give states of supposition the right kind of contents and structure to support functions of action guidance and reasoning. As an aside, this latter point should come as no surprise: it is widely recognized that states of imagination are useful for purposes of action guidance and reasoning (for elaboration, see Funkhouser & Spaulding 2009, Nanay 2016, Van Leeuwen 2011).

To take an example different from James’s, I have to decide to take Queen’s Lane or the High Street to work. I’m not sure which route will contain thicker packs of tourists, and my evidence is indeterminate. But I have to get to work somehow. I do not form the belief that there are less tourists on Queen’s Lane. I act under the supposition that there are, or that there probably are. Of course we might describe such a case as one of hoping there are less tourists on Queen’s Lane, or guessing that there are less, or whatever. States of hoping and guessing may accompany supposition. The point is that in many cases we can accurately describe action in conditions of time constrained epistemic permissiveness as action under supposition, and there is no pressure to describe these as cases of believing at will.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The line of argument taken in the above three paragraphs is similar to that taken by William Alston (1989, pp. 122-127), and others have suggested something similar. What I wish to add is the following observation. Consider the practical deliberation that occurs when I am uncertain whether to take Queen’s Lane or the High Street. The time approaches to make a choice. As it turns out, I decide to take Queen’s Lane. Unlike in the case of belief, there is pressure to describe the state that initiates, sustains, and guides my doing so as an intention. This is because initiating, sustaining and guiding action just is the functional profile of (proximal) intention. There is no more plausible option – no analogue to supposition here.

There is reason to think that if there is an epistemic state we can form at will, it is supposition.[[10]](#footnote-10) Given the role of epistemic states in the guidance of action, and given the frequently degraded evidential conditions agents like us face in the world, possession of the ability to suppose at will would clearly prove useful. Indeed, it seems to me that I use such an ability all the time. The same is not true of an ability to believe at will. Thus, while the closeness of intention to action renders a usefulness argument plausible for intention, the relative distance between belief and action undermines a transfer of this argument to belief. This does not entail that we cannot psychologically believe at will, of course. It remains available to the voluntarist to offer a different argument, or a more convincing version of the usefulness argument I have here rejected.

4 AN INTERESTING OBJECTION

One might point out in response that in many cases, one’s suppositions will play the role that beliefs paradigmatically play. I am planning a party, and I am fairly confident (but not certain) that 50 people will attend. I plan under the supposition that 50 will, making various arrangements. Is this so distinguishable from the role that a belief that 50 will attend will play? And if not, might the ability to suppose at will at least sometimes function as an ability to form beliefs at will? Or might we have something near to that ability? Perhaps, for example, we have an ability to form ‘in-between beliefs’ – beliefs that, on Eric Schwitzgebel’s (2001) account, only partially match the stereotypical dispositional profile of a full-on belief – at will.

There are various ways to respond to such questions. My response is best understood in the context of a fable, which I tell presently. Afterwards, I offer a more straightforward response.

A long time ago in a world quite close to ours, there developed a species of agent with a curious psychological architecture. This agent possessed a Reallief Mechanism that was modular with respect to the agent’s intentions, desires, and related motivational and emotional states. The Reallief Mechanism only took evidence about what is the case as input, and outputted Realliefs – states that play all the functional roles for cognition and action that we, on our world, ascribe to beliefs.

As a result of this mechanism’s modularity with respect to intentions, these agents could not produce Realliefs at will. But there were ways to influence the mechanism indirectly, by putting oneself in the way of various things the mechanism would recognize as evidentially relevant. Some agents – in particular, those who explicitly or implicitly valued the alignment of their Realliefs with their intentions, desires, and related motivational and emotional states – would go to great lengths to manipulate the Reallief Mechanism in certain ways. Of course they did not conceive of their activity as manipulating a Reallief Mechanism. Their cognitive science was not very advanced, and they had no idea such a mechanism existed.

Much like us, these agents also had the capacity to build mental models of things, including mental states. So they could model states such as desires, intentions, emotions, and Realliefs. This capacity proved useful as it enabled episodes of counterfactual reasoning, as well as a further capacity to guide their own behavior using models of Realliefs (that is, states of supposition). Of course, these model-states did not share the full functional profile of Realliefs. But in conditions of impoverished information, they served a number of useful purposes.

There arose debates amongst the philosophers in this world regarding the states the Reallief Mechanism produced. Not knowing of the Mechanism, the philosophers called these states B-states. As the philosophers used the term B-state, it was a close approximation to the states the Reallief Mechanism produced.

One argument these philosophers had concerned the ability to form B-states at will. This debate split into sub-debates that generated much disagreement. One such debate surrounded the question whether the formation of a B-state at will was even possible given features of the concept of a B-state. Another debate surrounded the question whether the formation of a B-state at will was psychologically possible.

From our world it is of course possible to see that the debates over psychological possibility turn on the confluence of an empirical and a conceptual question. If by B-state one denotes *a state sharing the full functional profile of a Reallief*, then these agents could not form B-states at will. But they could form states that share some of the functional profile of Realliefs, and given the revisability of mental state concepts, we might grant that a revised version of ‘B-state’ was formable at will for these agents. Of course, since doing so would require some terminological laxity regarding application of the term B-state, we might also point out that the difference between these views seems primarily verbal.

I introduced the fable in response to the objection that supposing at will can sometimes amount to in-between believing at will. More directly, my response is that in assessing this possibility we should avoid a merely verbal dispute. Coupled with terminological laxity, there are views of belief available on which, in some cases, a supposition will qualify as an in-between belief. But there remains, it seems to me, an interesting and fairly clear distinction between supposition and belief. We make this distinction in terms of the responsiveness of the state to evidence – unlike beliefs, suppositions can be rationally formed and remain in place in spite of a lack of anything close to sufficient evidence.[[11]](#footnote-11) It seems worthwhile to maintain this distinction, as well as the view that while supposing at will is possible for agents like us, believing at will is not.

5 CONCLUSION

I have discussed arguments for and against the conceptual and psychological possibility of intending at will, and believing at will. My motivation for doing so was progress towards a better understanding of the scope of the will in relation to belief and intention. The arguments I have offered suggest an asymmetry in this connection. While there are good reasons to think that agents like us possess an ability to form intentions at will, these reasons fail to transfer to the case of believing at will. The asymmetry has to do with differences between the normative profiles of belief and action. Belief aims at the truth; intention aims at successful action. Given this difference, I have suggested that rather than believing at will, human agents get by with an ability to suppose at will.

Thus far, I have stated my result modestly, in terms of the transfer of an argument from one possibility to another. But I think the results of this paper may be more significant than that. First, I have offered an argument that provides good reason to endorse the psychological possibility of intending at will. The existence of this possibility is of great importance to those writing on free will. For those writing on free will tend to focus on decisions – events of intention formation. Whether we can or cannot form intentions at will is thus of central relevance to reflection on the possibility and nature of free decisions.

Second, in arguing that a similar argument does not work regarding believing at will, I have blocked one obvious route to the establishment of psychological voluntarism. There may be other arguments that succeed where the one I consider fails, but it is not clear from here what those arguments would look like. Appeals to phenomenology are, in this connection, inconclusive at best. In my view, the failures of usefulness arguments regarding believing at will puts the burden of proof on those who endorse believing at will’s psychological possibility.

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1. In particular, my discussion is not intended to directly address recent interesting debates regarding ‘doxastic compatibilism’ (see, e.g., Booth 2014, McHugh 2014, Steup 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Compare Keith Frankish’s explication of a view he calls ‘direct activism’: ‘It is possible to form a belief with content p simply by performing a one-off action – call it ‘endorsement’ – in relation to the content p, where this action: [i] can be performed deliberately and in full consciousness, [ii] can be the object of practical reasoning, [iii] is causally basic, and [iv] is intentional under the description *forming the belief that p* (or some equivalent)’ (Frankish, 2007, pp. 524-525). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I discuss this problem in more detail in (Shepherd 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. What follows is an extension of a truncated argument offered in (Shepherd 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Thanks to a referee for raising the issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mele’s case involves Harry, ‘an erstwhile decision theorist residing in Kansas’ (p. 87). Harry receives two offers. First, one million dollars if he forms the intention within twenty-four hours to spend a week of December in Hawaii and does not form the intention not to do this. Second, a million dollars if, during the same twenty-four hours, he forms an intention never to visit Hawaii and forms no intention to go there. As Mele explicates Harry’s reasoning, it is plausible to see Harry’s reasoning involving not just his reasons to visit Hawaii or not, but also his special reasons to intend to visit Hawaii or not. Harry wonders which option is better given that he is going to get the money, because he is going to intend one way or another.

Clarke also offers an outlandish case, but argues that many mundane cases involve forming intentions to A for reasons that are divorced in certain ways from one’s reasons to A. So, for example, ‘Ann is distracted by the question whether to attend a meeting this afternoon’ (2007, p. 398). Ann wants the question settled so she can get work done, so after some deliberation she judges that intending to attend the meeting will most effectively put the issue out of her mind, and she so intends. But her reasons for so intending have little to do with her reasons for actually attending the meeting, which as Clarke describes it involve wanting to hear what will be said in the meeting. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. What makes the relevant reason(s) sufficient might plausibly vary depending on the question at issue, on the stakes, or whatever. Given that beliefs inform actions of all sorts, and that an agent’s interest in various questions in part motivates deliberation, it is plausible that practical constraints often apply in cases of theoretical no less than in practical deliberation. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A referee demurs, arguing that in some familiar cases – e.g., in highly important relationships – truth depends upon belief. Perhaps, for example, a person will be faithful to you only if you believe that they will be. Or perhaps your relationship will succeed only if you believe that it will. In my view, these are cases in which what one believes is not so important as how one acts. It might be that it is easier to act in the relevant ways while believing the relevant propositions. But in my experience that is what is tricky about such cases – the best one can do is to suppose, or to act as if, the propositions are true. See my discussion of supposing at will below. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. One might wish to describe these as cases in which we are guided by probabilized beliefs – say, a belief that there are probably less tourists on the Queen’s Lane. But insofar as this is a belief, it will be responsive to evidence (say, evidence that there are generally more tourists on Queen’s Lane). And if this is the case, the motivation for thinking we frequently need to form such beliefs at will diminishes. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Perhaps we can also suspend judgment at will. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Margharita Arcangeli (2014, p. 609) offers two additional differences between supposition and belief. Suppositions that are false are not necessarily defective; beliefs that are false are defective. And unlike belief, one can rationally suppose p while believing not p. These are among the reasons she gives for the fact that ‘nobody supports’ the view that supposition is a species of belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)