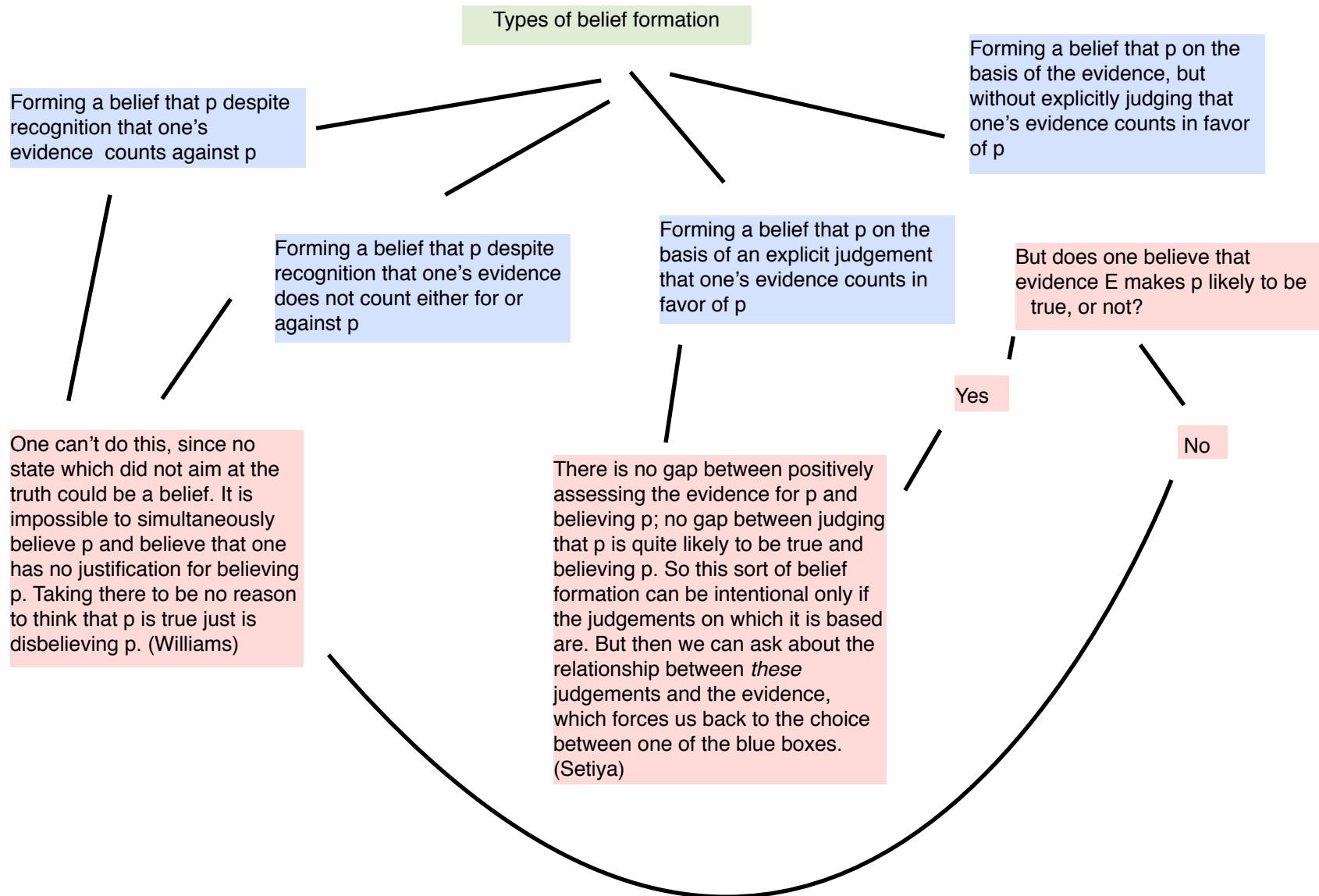


## Is believing p ever an intentional action?

One way to address this question is to divide the question into cases.



## Objections

1. How about intentionally forming a belief by way of hypnosis, etc? This is something we can do intentionally, and it can end with the formation of exactly the belief that we intended to acquire.
  - a. Suppose that we decided that beliefs formed in this way were formed intentionally. This is a pretty atypical case of belief formation, so it would not secure much autonomy in our beliefs.
  - b. Moreover, while, e.g., going to the hypnotist clearly might be an intentional action, it is not clear that forming the belief would be. This is different than other examples of intentional actions, like running a marathon, which are such that one cannot perform them “at will” but must do other things in order to do them. Consider running a marathon: not only is running the marathon an intentional action, but taking the very last step is also an intentional action. But in the case of hypnosis-based belief, we have not seen how the last step -- actually forming the belief -- could be an intentional action. It is more like jumping off of a cliff. One can’t decide, a few inches before the ground, whether or not one is going to hit it -- but wouldn’t we still say, e.g., that the act of killing oneself was intentional?
  - c. A distinction which might be relevant here is one Setiya (sec. II) discusses between two different cases in which one does A by doing B, where B is some intentional action. In one case, B is a *cause* of A, but not *part of the process* of doing A -- Setiya’s example of causing oneself to blush by dropping one’s trousers in public. In these cases, even if B is intentional and one does B because one wants to do A, we do not count A as a genuine example of nonbasic intentional action. In cases of genuine nonbasic intentional action, one does A by doing B, and B is part of the process, or an instance, of doing A. Hypnosis seems like a cause of forming the belief, not part of the process of forming the belief. Is this contrast clear? How would this apply to the case of jumping off the cliff?
2. How about cases in which I intentionally set out to form the belief that p iff p is true? Setting out to get evidence to help me on this question can clearly be an intentional action.
  - a. See Setiya’s discussion of “epistemically benevolent self-management” (50). This gets us back into the nature of genuine intentional nonbasic action, as discussed above.
3. How about cases analogous to examples of weakness of the will? Can’t I give in to the temptation to believe, even when I know that the evidence counts against it? Think about kids who believe in Santa Claus a bit too long.
  - a. Again, we can say that this is a marginal kind of belief formation, and that even if this sort of belief formation does turn out to be intentional, that this does not get us quite as much autonomy over our beliefs as we might have thought: on this view I can only decide to believe things when I am being irrational.
  - b. Lots of times, this sort of thing does not seem to be intentional. One keeps the belief out of a kind of inertia, or forms the belief without attention to what one is doing.

4. How about cases in which one forms a belief  $p$  on the basis of judgements that  $q$ , and if  $q$ , then  $p$ . Isn't it, for all we have said, possible to believe  $p$  on the basis of these judgements -- and so in response to evidence -- without making the prior judgement that if  $q$  and if  $q$  then  $p$  are true, then forming the belief that  $p$  would be forming a true belief? (Avoiding this prior judgement avoids Setiya's worry that this prior judgement would amount to already holding the belief that  $p$ .) Doesn't this sort of thing have to be possible, to avoid a regress?

a. Setiya discusses this possibility at the end of his paper. Here is what he says:

It follows that the indirection of judgment must be explained in some other way. Perhaps it lies in the fact that judgment is performed for what we might call "indirect reasons." One does not judge that  $p$  on the ground that  $p$ , having already formed that belief. Instead, one adverts to facts that one takes, implicitly, as evidence that  $p$ . In a simple case, I judge that  $p$  on the grounds that  $q$  and that *if  $q$ ,  $p$* . The problem is that, if I am to form the belief that  $p$  intentionally as a way of forming a true belief about the question whether  $p$ , forming that belief must present itself to me as an appropriate means. Unless I conclude, on the grounds that  $q$  and that *if  $q$ ,  $p$* , that forming the belief that  $p$  would be forming a true belief, this will not be so. And since the latter proposition is factive, drawing that conclusion amounts to having already formed the belief that  $p$ . We are back with the original difficulty.<sup>27</sup>

What's the argument here? Is it true that evidence "presenting itself as an appropriate means" must always involve already having the relevant belief?

5. Shah on the analogy between "believing at will" and "lying at will." Why this makes it intelligible how believing in response to evidence could be, in at least some cases, intentional but believing without regard to evidence never intentional. The analogy between an argument that one cannot intend to  $x$  on the basis of an intention to intend to  $x$ , and the argument that one cannot believe  $p$  on the basis of an intention to believe  $p$  on the basis of good reasons for the truth of  $p$ . If this does not show that we cannot intentionally intend something, why should the parallel argument show that we cannot intentionally believe something? Can we intentionally form intentions? Shah's suggestion that good:intention::true:belief.

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A separate question concerns our responsibility for our beliefs. Suppose that we conclude that forming a belief is never an intentional action. Would it follow that we are never responsible for our beliefs? Are there other examples of unintentional actions for which we are responsible? Could we understand responsibility for belief in terms of these?

The special challenge posed by belief about what is right and wrong.

Why worries about the responsibility we have for our beliefs threatens to generalize to worries about the possibility of intentional action more generally, if some view which analyzes intentional action partly in terms of causation by a belief is true.