

Deciding to believe

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1 Two puzzles about believing at will

1.1 *Why is it impossible?*

One can imagine deciding to believe something, and carrying out this decision by hypnosis or other means of self-deception about the causes of one's belief formation. It may also seem, intuitively, that one can decide to believe something on the basis of supporting evidence (though we will come back to this later). But the following seems not to be possible:

I form a belief that such-and-such simply by deciding to, irrespective of whether or not it seems to me to be true, while being fully aware that I am forming the belief at will.

This seems to be metaphysically impossible, not just psychologically impossible for creatures like us. The contrast with Williams' example of blushing at will.

One puzzle about believing at will is: why is this impossible?

1.2 *Is forming a belief ever an intentional action?*

A related but distinct question is: is forming a belief ever an intentional action?

There is an interesting connection here to Pascal's wager, which can be presented as an argument using the principle that one ought always to act so as to maximize expected utility. A question for the defender of the 'expected utility' version of Pascal's wager: is forming a belief an action? It seems that we need to assume that it is in order for expected utility considerations to come into play.

As we will see below, there is a plausible case to be made that forming a belief is never an intentional action. But this raises the question: can we be held responsible for our beliefs, at least sometimes? How, if these are not intentional actions?

It also can seem puzzling that judgement – the forming of a belief – could fail to be an intentional action. Isn't our inner, mental life intuitively the place where we are most free?

2 **Williams on the impossibility of believing at will**

(The reading of Williams which I'm giving follows that in Setiya, 'Believing at will,' which is on the course web page.)

Williams is out to explain not the impossibility of believing at will in general, but rather the impossibility of believing at will without regard to the truth of the belief formed. So we are concerned here only with the impossibility of forming the belief that p in a case in which the evidence does not seem to you to support the belief. We are also setting aside cases like hypnosis, intentional self-deception, etc.

Here is what Williams says to explain the impossibility of this sort of believing at will:

Belief cannot be like that; it is not a contingent fact that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I believe something, as it is a contingent fact that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I'm blushing. Why is this? 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. With regard to no belief could I know – or, if all this is to be done in full consciousness, even suspect – that I had acquired it at will. But if I can acquire beliefs at will, I must know that I am able to do this; and could I know that I was capable of this feat, if with regard to every feat of this kind which I had performed I necessarily had to believe that it had not taken place?

This explanation rests on two basic principles. One is familiar from our discussion of

Setiya: if I can form the belief that p at will, then my forming of the belief that p is an intentional action; but then I must be forming the belief that p in the knowledge that I am doing so.

But I also, in the sort of case we are considering, know that I am forming the belief at will, irrespective of the bearing of evidence on the truth of the belief.

The final part of the explanation of the impossibility of believing at will is that, as Williams puts it, belief ‘aims at the truth.’ The example of Moore’s paradox. Setiya glosses this aspect of Moore’s argument as follows:

It is impossible to believe p while believing that that belief is not justified.

Is this principle true? If so, what would explain its truth?

If it is true, does this sort of principle plus the sort of self-knowledge involved in intentional action explain the impossibility of the sort of believing at will with which we are concerned?

How much work is really being done by the sort of self-knowledge involved in intentional action here?

3 Setiya’s argument against taking judgement to be an intentional action

One might take the discussion above to show that we can not form beliefs intentionally irrespective of the evidence (except by hypnosis, etc.). So if we are asking whether we can *ever* form beliefs intentionally, we need only focus on the case in which one forms a belief on the basis of the evidence.

Here there are two cases to consider: the case in which one explicitly judges that the evidence supports the proposition in question, and the case in which one does not explicitly make this judgement.

3.1 Judgements based on explicit positive assessments of the evidence

The problem that explicitly judging that there is strong evidence for p , or that it is very likely that p is true, simply entails the belief that p . Why this leaves no room for an intentional act of belief formation on the basis of explicit positive assessment of the evidence.

3.2 Judgements not based on explicit positive assessments of the evidence

The problem of plotting a middle course between the case in which one assesses some evidence as good evidence for the truth of p , and the case in which one forms a belief in p irrespective of whether or not there is any good reason to think that it is true. But we have already seen that belief can’t be an intentional action in either of these cases.