

# Evidence, Judgment, and Belief at Will\*

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**Abstract:** Doxastic involuntarists have paid insufficient attention to two debates in contemporary epistemology: the permissivism debate and the debate over norms of assertion and belief. In combination, these debates highlight a conception of belief on which, if you find yourself in what I will call an ‘equipollent case’ with respect to some proposition  $p$ , there will be no reason why you can’t believe  $p$  at will. While doxastic involuntarism is virtually epistemological orthodoxy, nothing in the entire stock of objections to belief at will blocks this route to doxastic voluntarism. Against the backdrop of the permissivism debate and the literature on norms of belief and assertion, doxastic involuntarism emerges as an article of faith, not the obvious truth it’s usually purported to be.

**We can regard assertion as the verbal counterpart of judgement and judgement as the occurrent form of belief. — Timothy Williamson (2000: 10)**

## 1. Introduction

You sit down to watch your favorite team. At the start of the game, there’s no telling who will win. By the fourth quarter, your team is ahead 10 to 0. With two minutes left, your team still leads 10 to 0. Your team ends up winning and you watch your quarterback dump a cooler of Gatorade on his coach. You’re walking across a meadow. There’s a brownish object in a distant tree. Your daughter says it’s a hawk and your son says it’s a big piece of trash—a plastic bag or something like that. This is New Jersey so there’s a real question here. You walk toward the object to see who’s right. As you get close it flies away. You’re lost in my neighborhood. You see a street sign but you can’t read it. Your eyes are terrible from years staring at your computer. As you get close it eventually becomes clear what it says: “Bixby Ln.” You wake up at 4am. Your neighbors are throwing a party and there’s an unfamiliar car near your house. It’s dark so you can’t tell whether it’s blue or green. As the sun rises, it eventually becomes clear that it’s green. You’re trying to solve a murder. At the start of your investigation, there’s no telling who did it. Over the years the evidence points increasingly toward Jones. Finally, Jones confesses and even hands over the footage showing how she did it.

In each of these cases, you go by gradual improvements in your evidence from a situation where you are rationally required to suspend judgment on the relevant proposition to a situation where (if skepticism is false) you are rationally required to believe that proposition. In each case, as your evidential situation improves, your evidence provides less and less support to suspension of judgment, and more and more support to belief. According to a view suggested by Conee and Feldman (2004: 102), if your evidential situation improves sufficiently slowly in cases like these, there should be some point where your total evidence supports suspension and belief equally well

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while ruling out disbelief. Moreover, on this view, if your total evidence supports suspension and belief equally well while ruling out disbelief, suspension and belief will *both* be rationally permissible attitudes toward the relevant proposition. Call situations where your total evidence supports suspension and belief equally well (if there are any) ‘permissive situations.’ In this paper, I won’t argue that permissive situations are possible. I think they are, but I don’t have anything to add to the arguments of others. Instead, I will take it for granted that a person might *think* that permissive situations are possible, and even think that she is in one. My assumption here isn’t about rational belief. I won’t assume that a person might *rationally* think that she’s in a permissive situation. (Though I think this is also possible.) Rather, I will assume just that it’s psychologically possible for a person to think that she’s in a permissive situation.

Permissive situations will be important to the arguments below, so let me pause to correct two mistakes. First, thinking that you’re in a permissive situation with respect to  $p$  doesn’t require thinking that your evidence for  $p$  isn’t very good. For example, you might hold a view on which belief and suspension are both rationally permissible when it’s highly likely but not *certain* that  $p$  is true, you might think that you’re in a permissive situation with respect to  $p$  because you think it *is* highly likely but not certain that  $p$  is true, and, while thinking both of these things, you might think that your evidence for  $p$  is really quite *good*, since, after all,  $p$  is much more probable on your evidence than its negation.<sup>1</sup> Second, cases where your evidence for and against  $p$  supports  $p$  and  $\neg p$  equally well are not (as many epistemologists mistakenly assume) the closest epistemological analogues of cases where your reasons for and against  $\phi$ -ing support  $\phi$ -ing and not  $\phi$ -ing equally well.<sup>2</sup> Instead, permissive situations are the closest epistemological analogues of cases your reasons for and against  $\phi$ -ing support  $\phi$ -ing and not  $\phi$ -ing equally well. After all, suspending on  $p$  is a way of not believing  $p$ , and, by the lights of most epistemologists, your evidence supports suspending on  $p$  *better* than it supports believing  $p$  when it supports  $p$  and  $\neg p$  equally well (*i.e.*, when the probability of  $p$  conditional on your evidence is exactly 0.5).

Now, presumably, your estimate of your evidential situation with respect to  $p$  can affect whether you feel compelled to take a given doxastic attitude toward  $p$ . If you’re like me and you think that your total evidence doesn’t give you the slightest hint whether  $p$  is true, you’ll find yourself compelled to suspend on  $p$ . And if you’re like me, in a situation where your total evidence seems to establish without question that  $p$  *is* true, you’ll find yourself compelled to believe  $p$ . But what if you think you’re in a permissive situation with respect to  $p$ ? In this case, if you’re like me, you won’t find yourself compelled to believe  $p$ , and you won’t find yourself compelled to suspend on  $p$  either. Instead, you’ll simply find yourself unable to *dis*believe  $p$ . Of course, it’s possible that you’re not like me. But even so, this much seems uncontroversial: there are possible cases where a person thinks she’s in a permissive situation with respect to  $p$  and she neither feels compelled to believe  $p$  nor feels compelled to suspend on  $p$ . Call these cases ‘equipollent cases.’ More specifically, let’s stipulatively define ‘equipollent cases’ so that  $S$  is in one just in case (a) she thinks that she’s in a permissive situation with respect to some proposition  $p$ , (b) she neither feels

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<sup>1</sup> Again, I’m not saying that you might *rationally* believe any of these things, just that it’s psychological possible for someone to believe them.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Curley (1975: 198), Alston (1989: 266-7), and Peels (2014: 695) all seem to assume this.

compelled to believe  $p$  nor feels compelled to suspend on  $p$ , and (c) she feels a stronger attraction toward each of believing  $p$  and suspending on  $p$  than she feels toward *dis*believing  $p$ .

Equipollent cases are psychologically possible, and, as I will argue in this paper, they cause serious problems for doxastic involuntarism. By ‘doxastic involuntarism,’ I mean the thesis that we never have direct voluntary control over our beliefs. More carefully, I mean the thesis that we never have direct voluntary control over our beliefs *because we can’t believe at will*. What’s the difference between direct voluntary control and belief at will? Different philosophers mean different things by ‘at will’ and ‘direct voluntary control,’ but I will stipulatively define these terms as follows.

- (D1)  $S$   $\phi$ -d at will =<sub>df</sub>  $S$  decided to  $\phi$  and then carried out her intention to  $\phi$  by  $\phi$ -ing, in such a way that her intention to  $\phi$  was directly causally responsible for her  $\phi$ -ing.
- (D2)  $S$  had direct voluntary control over her  $\phi$ -ing =<sub>df</sub>  $S$   $\phi$ -d at will and her will was *free*, in the sense that she had control over whether she decided to  $\phi$  in the first place.

On these stipulative definitions of ‘at will’ and ‘direct voluntary control,’ having direct voluntary control over whether you  $\phi$  entails that you can  $\phi$  at will, but being able to  $\phi$  at will doesn’t require having direct voluntary control over whether you  $\phi$ .<sup>3</sup> Why define ‘at will’ and ‘direct voluntary control’ this way? Because, as Steup points out (2017: 2674), the debate between voluntarists and involuntarists isn’t supposed to depend on the debate between libertarians, compatibilists, and hard determinists. The core idea behind involuntarism is supposed to be that, even if hard determinism is true and nobody has free will, belief and action are still importantly disanalogous in at least this sense: while it’s possible to perform various *actions* at will, it’s never possible to believe any proposition at will, at least for creatures like you and me. Properly understood, involuntarism is equivalent to this disanalogy thesis.<sup>4</sup>

As Steup (2000), Booth (2007), Hieronymi (2009), Peels (2015), and many others point out, involuntarism is the reigning view. In fact, it’s so widely accepted that it’s standardly taken as a datum, and even epistemologists who would clearly benefit if it were *false* seem unwilling to question it.<sup>5</sup> The literature contains widespread disagreement about *why* involuntarism is true, but

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<sup>3</sup> When is an intention to  $\phi$  *directly* causally responsible for your  $\phi$ -ing? I can’t give necessary and sufficient conditions, but, for present purposes, we can simply note that your intention to  $\phi$  isn’t what I’m calling “directly” causally responsible for your  $\phi$ -ing if you’re in anything relevantly analogous to Feldman’s (2001) light switch case or Davidson’s (2002) mountain climber case. (In the former case, you form an intention to believe that the lights are on, but you know you can’t believe this without causing yourself to believe it, so you get up and switch on the lights, thus causing yourself to form the belief. In the latter case, you decide to drop your climber partner to his death, which makes you so nervous that your hands shake, which causes you to drop him.)

<sup>4</sup> Here and throughout, by ‘voluntarism’ and ‘involuntarism,’ I mean *doxastic* voluntarism and involuntarism, respectively. Thus, the thesis I’m calling ‘voluntarism’ is essentially equivalent to what Steup calls “the thesis of doxastic intentionality” (ibid: 2674).

<sup>5</sup> For example, in their book-length answer to the question how we should regulate our intellectual lives, Roberts and Wood state explicitly that they don’t want to even *suggest* that involuntarism is false (2007: 62-3). In their defense of the thesis that it’s possible to deliberate about what to believe, Shah and Velleman assert without argument that belief at will is “notoriously impossible” (2005: 502) and then argue that people mistakenly think we can’t deliberate about what to

little disagreement about *whether* it's true. Indeed, the involuntarism debate is really more of an in-house debate about the best argument for involuntarism than a debate between involuntarists and *voluntarists*. As Boyle observes, “[t]he explanation of the impossibility of believing at will, and the precise nature of this constraint, are matters of controversy, but that there is truth here that needs explaining is not terribly controversial” (2009: 119-20).

Yet this lack of controversy is remarkable. Involuntarism is a very strong thesis. It says that there is literally *no* case—not even a merely *possible* case—where someone with normal human cognitive capacities believes something at will (Reisner 2013, Peels 2015, *etc.*). It's also counterintuitive. I don't mean that *epistemologists* find involuntarism counterintuitive. Most of them don't. But as Turri, Rose, and Buckwalter (forthcoming) show, involuntarism is pretheoretically counterintuitive, in the sense that it's inconsistent with the intuitions of the folk. What's more, involuntarism threatens obvious truths about the relationship between belief and action. To quote from Audi (himself an involuntarist),

[b]elief is profoundly analogous to action. Both are commonly grounded in reasons; both are a basis for praising or blaming the subject; both are sensitive to changes in one's environment; both can appropriately be described as objects of decision and deliberation, and beliefs can appear quite action-like when conceived as formed by assent or by acceptance. These similarities can make it plausible to think of belief as sometimes (directly) voluntary in the sense that, like raising our hands, believing is sometimes done “at will.” (2015: 27)

Right! So why are most epistemologists involuntarists? Given all this, involuntarists surely have the burden of proof, and behind the widespread acceptance of involuntarism, we should find knock-down, drag-out arguments for the view. But as I'll argue in this paper, nothing in the literature even approximates a compelling argument for involuntarism. There are natural conceptions of belief on which it's hard to see why someone in an equipollent case couldn't believe at will, and involuntarists have produced virtually no reason for thinking that these conceptions of belief are mistaken. As a result, involuntarism emerges as an article of faith, not the obvious truth it's often purported it to be.

## 2. Belief in the Image of Assertion

Which norms govern assertion? There are many answers to this question, but epistemologists as diverse as Wright (1996), Williamson (2000), Adler (2002), Huemer (2007), and Sosa (2010) all think that, whatever norms govern assertion, these same norms govern *belief*. Why think the norms of assertion also govern belief? For various reasons, but these philosophers agree with the likes of Peirce (1903: 140), Geach (1957: 80), Frege (1970: 1-2), Ramsey (1931: 144), and Dummett (1981:

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believe because they think this follows from the fact that we can't believe at will (p. 504). In a recent contribution to the disagreement debate, Elgin (2010) argues that much of the disagreement literature rests on a mistake because “[b]elief is not voluntary. ... My response [to a peer's disagreeing with me] is not under my control. Debates about whether I should suspend belief in the face of peer disagreement are wrong headed. They are like debates about whether I should be less than six feet tall. I don't have any choice” (pp. 60-61). And to give one more example, Booth (2015) argues that it's a contingent truth that we can't believe at will by assuming that it's a *truth* that we can't believe at will and then arguing that it's not a conceptual truth. Obviously, if it's not already established that we can't believe at will, this argument won't convince anyone that it's *contingently true* that we can't believe at will.

362) that belief is the internal analogue of assertion. According to Williamson, for example, “we can regard assertion as the verbal counterpart of judgement and judgement as the occurrent form of belief” (2000: 10).

This conception of belief will be important for the remainder of this paper, so notice that Williamson calls judgment a *form* of belief, and contrast his view with the following passage from Shah and Velleman.

Ordinarily, the reasoning that is meant to issue or not issue in a belief is meant to do so by first issuing or not issuing in a judgment. A judgment is a cognitive mental act of affirming a proposition . . . . It is an act because it involves occurrently presenting a proposition, or putting it forward in the mind; and it is cognitive because it involves presenting the proposition as true—or, as we have said, affirming it. A belief, by contrast, is a mental state of representing a proposition as true, a cognitive attitude rather than a cognitive act. . . . Reasoning aims to issue or not issue in a belief that *p* in accordance with the relevant norm by first issuing or not issuing in a judgment that *p* in accordance with the corresponding norm. (2005: 503)

On Shah and Velleman’s view, my judgment that *p* is not itself a belief in *p*, occurrent or otherwise. By judging that *p*, I might cause myself to believe *p*, and if I believe *p* while I’m still in the act of judging that *p*, then (presumably) my judging that *p* gives my belief the property of being presently occurrent. But my judgment isn’t a belief. This isn’t the view we get from the Williamson passage. On that view, my judgment that *p* is *itself* an occurrent belief in *p*, not just something I might do while believing *p* that would make my belief in *p* occurrent. Williamson doesn’t say much about the nature of belief, but he’s clear that, on his view, knowledge is the norm of both assertion *and* belief because believing *p* is the “mental counterpart” of asserting *p* (2000: 11), which “stands to asserting *p* as the inner stands to the outer” (ibid: 255). Since it’s hard to see how believing *p* could be the mental counterpart of asserting *p* if the mental acts that actually resemble assertions (namely, judgements) are not themselves beliefs, Williamson’s view of belief suggests that judgements aren’t just *kinds* of beliefs but *paradigms* of belief.<sup>6</sup>

What are judgments, then? Williamson doesn’t say, but he seems to accept something like Shah and Velleman’s account of judgment, and for present purposes, we can assume that their account is correct. According to Shah and Velleman (ibid: 503-5), *S* judges that *p* at *t* just in case, at *t*, she affirms *p* in order to affirm the *truth*—in order to affirm the correct answer to the question whether *p*. As we noted above, on Shah and Velleman’s view, my judgment that *p* isn’t itself a belief in *p*; instead, it’s just (at most) the proximal cause of my belief in *p*.<sup>7</sup> Since effects can’t precede their causes, Shah and Velleman must say that, even though judging that *p* consists in affirming *p* in order to affirm the correct answer to the question whether *p*, it’s possible to judge that *p* without *already* believing *p*. And of course, Williamson must say the same thing. For if judging that *p* requires that I already believe *p*, then my judgment that *p* can’t *itself* be my belief in *p*, occurrent or otherwise. Instead, if judging that *p* requires that I already believe *p*, then my judging that *p* must

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<sup>6</sup> On this way of thinking, it’s no accident that we use the expression ‘suspension of judgment’ to talk about withholding *belief*. It’s also worth noting that, on a sensible interpretation of the data produced by Turri, Rose, and Buckwalter’s (forthcoming) study, the folk tacitly rely on something like Williamson’s conception of belief. (Thanks to Turri, Rose, and Buckwalter for helpful discussion of this question.)

<sup>7</sup> I say “at most” because, on their view, my judgment that *p* might fail to cause a belief in *p*. (More on this below.)

be something I'm doing *while* believing  $p$ . Is it possible, then, to judge that  $p$  without already believing  $p$ ? Of course it is. Just imagine some time  $t$  at which I don't believe  $p$ , imagine that, at this time  $t$ , I *do* believe that  $p$  is likely to be true, imagine some later time  $t^2$  at which I affirm  $p$  in order to affirm the correct answer to the question whether  $p$ , and imagine that I do this on the basis of just my belief that  $p$  is likely to be true. Here's a case where I judge that  $p$  without already believing  $p$ , so it's no strike against Williamson or Shah and Velleman that, on both of their views, it's possible to judge that  $p$  without already believing  $p$ .

Call Williamson's view 'JB,' since it says that judgments are *beliefs*, and call Shah and Velleman's view 'JC,' since it says judgments aren't beliefs but are instead potential *causes* of beliefs. Which is more plausible—JB or JC? I'm strongly inclined toward the former. First, I don't see why we should agree with Shah and Velleman that no judgment is a belief. They provide literally no argument for this thesis. They assert that beliefs are mental states while judgments are mental acts, and this is the closest they come to arguing that judgments aren't beliefs. Apparently, the reader is supposed to deduce for herself that, because no act is a state, no judgment is a belief. But this inference isn't valid unless all beliefs are states. So why think both that all beliefs are states and that no act is a state? Arguably, some acts *are* states. Consider Sosa's example of the street performer's acting like a statue at some tourist site. According to Sosa, the person's performance can count as a state (2007: 23). But the performance *just is* the person's acting like a statue, so the performance can't be a state unless it's both an act *and* a state.

Even if no act is a state, however, I don't see why we should agree that every belief is a state. In fact, to put my cards on the table, I'm unsure why any philosopher thinks *any* belief is a state. I know philosophers are in the habit of calling beliefs 'states,' but I share van Inwagen's (2007) puzzlement about this habit. A state is just a condition that something is in at a given time. Serenity, agitation, and unemployment are states. Unemployment is just the condition that a person is in when she doesn't have a job, agitation is just the condition that a person is in when something's bothering her, and so on. Is any belief *itself* a condition that someone is in at a given time? To my ear, the affirmative answer sounds like a category mistake. A person can be in the condition of *having* a belief, I suppose, but she can also be in the condition of having a pencil, or a bank account, or a sibling, or a goldfish, and these things aren't states. Now perhaps philosophers are just speaking loosely when they say that beliefs are states, or perhaps they're using 'mental state' as a term of art and taking it for granted that, because beliefs are mental states (in this stipulative sense), beliefs must be states. If so, fair enough. But on any loose use of the word 'state,' or any stipulative use of the term 'mental state,' asserting without argument that no act is a state just begs the question against JB.

Perhaps, then, when philosophers say that beliefs are states, they just mean that beliefs are *static*, in the sense that they're fixed, unchanging entities, the way a bruise or a tattoo might be fixed and unchanging. Okay. But now, why should we agree with them? *Nonoccurrent* beliefs seem static in this sense. But if it were clear that *all* beliefs are static in this sense, then it would be equally clear that no judgment is belief, and (presumably) we wouldn't see the likes of Peirce, Geach, Frege, Ramsey, Dummett, Sosa, Wright, Williamson, Adler, and Huemer saying that belief is the internal

analogue of assertion. In any case, whatever explains why philosophers often call beliefs ‘states,’ arguing for JC requires more than just asserting that beliefs are states while judgments are acts.<sup>8</sup>

Second, while I don’t see any non-question-begging reason for accepting JC, I do see excellent reasons for rejecting it. As Shah and Velleman make clear, JC entails that it’s possible to judge that  $p$  without believing  $p$ . “Exactly how one accomplishes the transition [from judgment to belief] is of course ineffable,” they say, “but it is a perfectly familiar accomplishment, in which a proposition is occurrently presented as true in such a way that it sticks in the mind, lastingly so represented” (p. 503). What’s familiar *to me* is just the accomplishment of retaining some of my beliefs. But anyway, consider a scenario where I judge that  $p$  and it doesn’t “stick in my mind.” Then, if JC is true, we have a case where I judge that  $p$  without believing  $p$ . Yet as Boyle points out (2009: 130-32), the idea that I might judge that  $p$  without believing  $p$  is hard to understand, since the truth-orientation of judgment seems to guarantee that I believe the propositional contents of my judgments, at least while I’m in the act of judging. Now of course, JC might have significant theoretical advantages over JB, and perhaps, in virtue of these theoretical advantages, we should prefer JC to JB even though it’s hard to see how someone could judge that  $p$  without believing  $p$ . But things arguably go the other way around. After all, JB fits much better than JC with two of the most powerful paradigms in contemporary epistemology: Williamson’s own knowledge-first paradigm and the virtue-theoretic paradigm we get from Sosa (2007), Greco (2010), and others, which says that beliefs are relevantly analogous to an archer’s shot, a batter’s swing, and other paradigm examples of action.

Considerations along these lines give JB a decisive advantage over JC, I think. But there’s another serious alternative to JB: the view that Boyle himself defends. According to this view, my judging “does not stand to my believing as means to end or cause to effect, but as expression to condition expressed” (2009: 132-33). Call this view ‘JE,’ since it says that judgments are neither causes of beliefs nor themselves beliefs, but *expressions* of beliefs. Which is more plausible, then—JB or JE? Here I’m genuinely agnostic, but I do have a slight preference for JB. First, while I understand the suggestion that our *assertions* express our beliefs, I’m puzzled by the thought that our judgments express our beliefs. If I assert that  $p$ , I express *to you* (or to anyone else listening) that I believe that  $p$ . But if I *judge* that  $p$ , to whom do I express my belief in  $p$ ? Myself? If so, why would I do this? To let myself know that I believe  $p$ ? If so, how could I know to express *this* to myself—instead of (say) the proposition that I *don’t* believe  $p$ —unless I already know that I believe  $p$ ? We can do cartwheels trying to answer these questions, or we can avoid them entirely by simply accepting JB.

Second, I don’t see why Boyle himself prefers JE to JB. Boyle is defending a view that he calls “the thesis of active belief,” which says that our agential relation to our own beliefs is relevantly analogous to our agential relation to our own actions (p. 121). At best, JE is merely *consistent* with

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<sup>8</sup> Note that JB doesn’t entail the thesis that Audi calls “behavioral doxastic voluntarism” (2015: 93-4). According to this thesis, believing is an action-type. JB entails that some beliefs are acts, but it doesn’t entail that believing is an action-type, since (for example) it’s consistent with the thesis that nonoccurrent beliefs aren’t acts. If, however, JB is tantamount to the thesis that judgments are events of belief formation (as I’m inclined to think it is), then JB *does* entail the thesis that Audi calls “genetic doxastic voluntarism” (ibid), which says that *forming* a belief is *sometimes* an action.

this thesis. In contrast, JB plainly supports it. So why does Boyle accept JE instead of JB, when the latter clearly fits better with his own view? Boyle explains at length why he prefers JE to JC, but the following passage is the closest he gets to explaining why he accepts JE instead of JB.

[Belief] is not ascribed in the continuous sense: we say “*S* believes *p*,” not “*S* is believing *p*.” And with good reason: in ascribing a belief to a person, we do not imply anything about what he is *up to*: he need not be thinking any particular thoughts, or performing any particular (voluntary) actions. ... To ascribe a belief that *p* to a person seems at most to imply something about his dispositions, about what he would do if —, not what he is actually doing. (p. 137)

This all seems right, but it hardly counts against JB. First, *judgment* isn’t ascribed in the continuous sense. Instead of saying “*S* is judging that *p*” or even “*S* judges that *p*,” we say “*S* believes that *p*.” Second, and more important, while it’s true that a person might believe *p* at *t* without performing any mental action at *t*, this just entails that it’s possible to believe *p* at *t* without judging that *p* at *t*, and thus that some beliefs aren’t judgments. It doesn’t follow that no judgment is a belief, or even that some judgments aren’t beliefs. So it’s unclear why Boyle accepts JE instead of JB.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, these considerations don’t establish that JB is true. Far from it, and I’m not myself convinced that JB is true. But if nothing else, these considerations do show that JB is at least defensible. If JB is even defensible, however, then involuntarists cannot just *assume* that it’s false, or give arguments for their view that take it for granted that JB is false. A successful argument for involuntarism must *show* that JB is false, or at least that involuntarism is true even if JB *isn’t* false. Either way, involuntarists can’t simply ignore JB.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. The Argument from Equipollence

With this in mind, suppose Jones has been charged with murder, and suppose that, for whatever reason, we have attended the entire trial. Suppose we have just heard the closing arguments,

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<sup>9</sup> Actually, Boyle probably accepts JE instead of JB because he’s worried about picking a fight with involuntarists. As he says in the opening paragraph of his paper, “[m]ost contemporary philosophers agree that, in one significant sense, what we believe is not up to us: we simply cannot believe at will ... [T]he observation that our beliefs are not under our direct voluntary control suggests a challenge that defenders of [the thesis of active belief] must face” (pp. 119-20).

<sup>10</sup> Objection: Yes they can, since JB is obviously false! After all, a judgment can’t be a belief without playing the right functional role, but many judgments don’t last long enough to play the functional role of a belief. Reply: If functionalism is true, something that lasts only nanoseconds can play the functional role of a belief. Suppose I’m a soldier, I step on a landmine and I’m blown to pieces right when I realize that I’ve just stepped on a landmine. This might happen (unfortunately), so either functionalism is false or something can play the functional role of belief while lasting almost no time at all.

Here it’s worth noting that fleeting beliefs (beliefs that are gone almost as soon as they’re formed) aren’t the exception but the rule. It’s the first day of class. I’m learning my students’ names. One student says his name is Bernie. I believe him, but as soon as the next student introduces herself, I realize that I’ve already forgotten the first student’s name. I walk down the hall to the restroom. On the way, I observe that your door is open, that there’s a student in your office, that the water fountain is dripping, that it’s windy outside, and so on, forming all variety of beliefs about my environment. By the time I get to the restroom, however, I’ve already forgotten all this trivia. And good thing too, since I won’t need any of it in the future. As we make our way through life, we’re constantly acquiring and then “deleting” useless information, and we’re often unable to retain even the information we need. As a result, most of our beliefs are gone almost as soon as they’re formed. Longstanding beliefs are unusual, in the sense that they’re considerably less common than fleeting beliefs, and our theories of belief should capture this fact.

suppose we know that we aren't going to get any further evidence relevant to the question whether Jones is guilty, and suppose that, while the jury is deliberating, a friend asks what we think. You say Jones did it and I say that I'm not sure. Suppose we then explain our respective answers and we eventually agree that, conditional on the total evidence, believing that Jones did it and suspending judgment on this proposition are both rationally permissible. Suppose further that, as we sit there talking, I neither feel compelled to start believing that she did it, nor feel compelled to continue suspending judgment on this proposition. That is, suppose I'm in an equipollent case with respect to the proposition that Jones did it. And finally, suppose that I'm intellectually courageous. By my own lights, I'm rationally permitted to pursue the acquisition of true belief by believing that Jones did it, and I'm also rationally permitted to safeguard against the acquisition of false belief by continuing to suspend judgment on this proposition. If I were intellectually cautious, I would pick the latter option. Since I'm intellectually courageous, I pick the former and then carry out my intention to believe that Jones did it by affirming that Jones did it—by consciously thinking to myself “Okay, Jones did it.” Of course, it's possible to affirm that  $p$  without judging that  $p$ , and if I'm not trying to affirm the *correct* answer the question whether Jones did it when I think to myself “Jones did it,” I'm not *judging* that she did it. But in the case we're imagining, I *am* affirming that Jones did it in order to affirm the correct answer the question whether she did it. So, in the case we're imagining, I judge that Jones did it, and I do this as a direct causal consequence of my intention to believe that she did it.

With this in mind, consider the following argument. (Call it the ‘argument from equipollence,’ or the ‘AFE’ for short.)

- (1) I judged at will that Jones is guilty.
  - (2) My judgment was itself a belief.
- ∴ (3) I believed at will that Jones is guilty.

This argument is valid—at least given the details of the case and the natural assumption that, when I judged that Jones is guilty, I took my judgment to be a belief. As I will argue below, however, nothing in the entire stock of objections to belief at will threatens either premise of this argument, since nothing in the entire stock of these objections threatens JB or the assertion that I judged at will that Jones is guilty.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. Objections to Belief at Will

The literature contains two kinds of objections to belief at will: conceptual objections and psychological objections. According to the former, belief at will isn't even conceivable; nothing

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<sup>11</sup> The AFE bears some resemblance to the arguments in Raz 1999, Ginet 2001, Frankish 2007, Nickel 2010, and McHugh 2014. As Sylvan (2016) notes, however, these arguments require that permissive situations are actually possible. Since the AFE only requires that a person might *think* that she's in a permissive situation, arguments against permissivism threaten the arguments in Raz 1999, Ginet 2001, Frankish 2007, Nickel 2010, and McHugh 2014, but they don't threaten the AFE.

that it is possible to do at will could fall under the concept BELIEF. According to the latter, belief at will *is* conceivable, but we can't do it; attention to our actual psychological abilities reveals that we simply lack the capacity. In this section, I will argue that even the best conceptual and psychological objections to belief at will in the literature pose no serious threat to the AFE.

To see why the best conceptual objections don't threaten the AFE, it's only necessary to note the following. First, contrary to arguments forwarded by Williams (1973), Scott-Kakures (1994), and others, there is neither any reason to think that I must have believed that Jones did it before I judged that she did it, nor any reasons to think that, if I *didn't* believe that Jones did it before I judged that she did it, then I must have had a dim view of my epistemic position with respect to the proposition that she did it when I judged that she did it, or somehow changed my mind about my epistemic position with respect to the proposition that she did it along the way to judging that she did it.<sup>12</sup> Second, contrary to arguments from Buckareff (2004), Hieronymi (2006), Setiya (2008), Schmitt (2015), and others, there is no reason to think that I must have judged that Jones did it for extrinsic reasons, merely practical reasons, or any other reasons that would suggest that my judgment wasn't aimed at truth. Third, contrary to arguments from Winters (1979) and others, even though I judged that Jones did it on the basis of considerations relevant to the truth of the proposition that she did it, this doesn't suggest that my judgment couldn't be relevantly analogous to any action that I might perform at will. For example, suppose I assert *p*, and suppose I assert *p* on the basis of my belief that *p* is sufficiently likely to be true. Then I assert *p* on the basis of considerations relevant to its truth, but it doesn't follow that I don't assert *p* at will. After all, my asserting *p* on the basis of my belief that *p* is sufficiently likely to be true is plainly consistent with my deciding to assert *p* and then carrying out my intention to assert *p* by asserting it, in such a way that my intention to assert *p* is directly causally responsible for my asserting *p*.<sup>13</sup>

Fourth, contrary to arguments by Buckareff (2006), McHugh (2014), Booth (2015), and others, there is no reason to think that my decision to believe that Jones did it couldn't have been causally responsible for my judging that she did it. Plausibly, if I'd found the evidence compelling, then I would have gone straight from considering the evidence to judging that Jones did it, without ever deciding to believe that she did it. But of course, I didn't find the evidence compelling. By hypothesis, it didn't trigger whatever cognitive process automatically produces judgment when I do find the evidence compelling, and, as a consequence, I wouldn't have judged that Jones did it if I hadn't decided to believe that she did it. Fifth, contrary to arguments from Audi (2015) and others, there is no reason to think that I caused myself to judge that Jones did it in a way relevantly analogous to the way I might cause myself to blush (*e.g.*, by thinking about something embarrassing which then causes me to blush). If there's any sense in which, by deciding to believe that Jones did it, I caused myself to judge that she did it, I caused myself to judge that she did it in exactly the way I would cause myself to raise my arm in a paradigm case where I raise it at will. Sixth, contrary to arguments from Peels (2014) and others, there seems no reason to think it's an *essential*

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<sup>12</sup> As Boyle points out (2009: fn. 19), even if JE is true, a judgment might take place at the exact moment that the corresponding belief comes into existence.

<sup>13</sup> As this case illustrates, it's possible to perform an *action* on the basis of what Hieronymi calls "constitutive reasons" (2006: 51).

feature of my doing something at will that, after I decide to do it, I can still control when I do it and for how long. To see why, just imagine a case where my reasons for snapping my fingers are perfectly counterbalanced by my reasons for not snapping them, and suppose it's obvious that, if I'm ever going to snap them at all, I should snap them *right now*. We can easily imagine that, in this case, *if* I decide to snap my fingers, I'll be compelled to snap them immediately. And we can also imagine that, since I don't know how to control the duration of a snap, I won't be able to control the length of my snap if I decide to snap them. But even with these suppositions, it clearly doesn't follow that, if I decide to snap my fingers and then snap them, I won't be snapping them at will.<sup>14</sup>

There are, of course, other conceptual objections to belief at will. But these are the best of them, and the best-known of them. And in any case, it should be clear enough why no conceptual objection threatens the AFE. The basic problem is simply this: no conceptual objection threatens JB, yet, if JB is true, belief at will seems about as hard to conceive as assertion at will.

To see why the best psychological objections in the literature don't threaten the AFE, it's only necessary to note two things. First, the vast majority of psychological objections in the literature focus on the wrong kinds of cases. Even if we agree with Curley (1975), Alston (1989), Nottelmann (2006), Booth (2015), and *many* others that we can't believe at will in cases where *p* strikes us as obviously false, cases where *p* strikes us as obviously true, and cases where *p* strikes us as exactly as probable as its negation, this is all irrelevant to the case we have been considering. In that case, the proposition in question doesn't seem obviously false, obviously true, or exactly as probable as its negation. Now Alston at least considers cases where the proposition in question doesn't seem obviously false, obviously true, or exactly as probable as its negation. But his comments about these cases are susceptible to straightforward empirical refutation. After asking us to consider some philosophical or religious view that seems more plausible than all of its competitors, Alston says this.

The most obvious suggestion is that although in these cases the supporting considerations are seen as less conclusive, here too the belief follows automatically, without intervention by the will, from the way things seem at the moment to the subject. In the cases of (subjective) certainty belief is determined by that sense of certainty, or, alternatively, by what leads to it, the sensory experience or whatever; in the cases of (subjective) uncertainty belief is still determined by what plays an analogous role, the sense that one alternative is more likely than the others, or by what leads to that. Thus when our philosopher or religious seeker "decides" to embrace theism or the identity theory, what has happened is that at that moment this position seems more likely to be true, seems to have weightier considerations in its favor, than any envisaged alternative. Hence *S* is, at that moment, no more able to accept atheism or epiphenomenalism instead, than he would be if theism or the identity theory seemed obviously and indubitably true. (p. 266)

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<sup>14</sup> Objection: But even if I can't control when I snap them or for how long I snap them, I can still control *how* I snap them. For example, I can use my right hand or my left hand. Reply: I can also control how I judge that Jones did it. I can judge that she did it by thinking to myself "Jones did it," I can judge that she did it by thinking to myself "Jones is the person who murdered Smith," I can judge that she did it by thinking to myself "the proposition that Jones is the murderer is true," and so on. I can even judge that she did it by hearing you ask who murdered Smith and then thinking to myself "Jones." And in any case, this is all beside the point. For as Steup points out (2017: §10), the idea that you can't do something at will unless you can control *how* you do it is tantamount to the idea that you can't decide to  $\phi$  and then carry out your intention to  $\phi$  by  $\phi$ -ing unless you can control how you  $\phi$ , which is simply implausible. Consistent with your  $\phi$ -ing at will, there might be only one way you're able to  $\phi$ .

The central idea in this argument—that belief always follows automatically when someone finds a philosophical or religious view more likely to be true than its competitors—might accurately describe Alston’s mental life, but it misdescribes my own. I find virtue epistemology more plausible than its competitors, for example, but I don’t believe it or any of its competitors. I’m suspending judgment about the correct theory of knowledge. In fact, because there are many competing theories of knowledge, and because virtue epistemology only strikes me as *slightly* more plausible than all of its competitors, my credence distribution over the various theories of knowledge is relatively flat, and the probability that I assign to *every* theory of knowledge is below 0.5. So, even though I find virtue epistemology more plausible than its competitors, my credence in virtue epistemology is still below 0.5, and I don’t believe that virtue epistemology is true. Now perhaps I’m missing Alston’s point. Perhaps he just means that, if someone finds a philosophical or religious view more plausible than its *negation* (rather than its competitors), then belief follows automatically. But even this is false. I am suspending judgment about the pragmatic encroachment debate, for example, even though I find interest-relativism slightly more plausible than its negation.

Of course, in these kinds of cases, Alston might say that I’m *compelled* to suspend judgment, and thus that I’m agreeing with the spirit of his view if not its letter. But even if I can’t help but suspend judgment in these cases, there’s still an important difference between these cases and equipollent cases. Again, in the main case that we have been considering, I don’t just find the proposition that Jones did it more plausible than its negation; I find this proposition considerably more plausible than its negation. I find it so plausible that I think I’m rationally permitted to believe it. Of course, I don’t find it so much more plausible than its negation that I find myself *compelled* to believe it. But I don’t find myself compelled to suspend judgment on this proposition either. So, like virtually every psychological objection in the literature, Alston’s objections target cases that aren’t relevant to the AFE.

Second, without arguments against JB, there’s little reason to think that, in an equipollent case, anyone would have any trouble believing at will, and there’s even *less* reason to think that, in an equipollent case, *everyone* would have trouble believing at will. Presumably, in an equipollent case, even Curley and Alston could easily *judge* at will. Why, after all, couldn’t they? And even if in fact they couldn’t, nothing interesting would follow. Anything might prevent a specific individual from doing something at will, and there’s a glaring asymmetry between arguments that say “I can do it, so somebody can,” and arguments that say “I can’t do it, so nobody can.” The first are deductively valid while the second are paradigm instances of hasty generalization. Given this asymmetry, it seems completely dogmatic to insist that it’s psychosocial impossible to judge at will. And of course, if JB is true, an instance of judgment at will might be an instance of belief at will. Since none of psychological objections in the literature threatens JB, none of the psychological objections in the literature poses any serious challenge to the AFE. But as we saw above, the best *conceptual* objections in the literature don’t threaten the AFE either. The upshot? While

epistemologists often feel safe just *asserting* that involuntarism is true, nothing in the literature even approximates a compelling argument for involuntarism.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. Epistemically Rational Belief at Will

If the arguments in the previous sections succeed, then involuntarism isn't nearly as plausible as its current widespread acceptance suggests. Even if these arguments do succeed, however, we might wonder whether belief at will could ever be *epistemically rational*. According to Sylvan (2016), belief at will is possible, but epistemically rational belief at will isn't. On his view, we can believe at will when we think that we're in a permissive situation with respect to the relevant proposition; because permissive situations aren't possible, however, we'll always be *wrong* when we think that we're in one; as a consequence, epistemically rational belief at will isn't possible (p. 1659). Moreover, according to Sylvan, because epistemically rational belief at will isn't possible, our ability to believe at will doesn't "constitute a significant form of doxastic control" (ibid). If Sylvan is right, then the upshot is presumably that the arguments in §§1-4 don't establish anything interesting, even if they work, since they don't lend any credibility to rational belief at will.

I find Sylvan's arguments against permissive situations unconvincing, but for present purposes I will assume that they work. Given this assumption, is Sylvan correct that belief at will can't be epistemically rational, or correct that, because belief at will can't be epistemically rational, our ability to believe at will wouldn't constitute a significant form of doxastic control? I want to say 'no.' Perhaps our ability to believe at will would be *more* significant if exercising it didn't require being epistemically irrational, but this doesn't entail that it's *not* significant. And in any case, the nature of belief is interesting in its own right. Even if epistemically rational belief at will isn't possible, and even if this entails that our ability to believe at will doesn't constitute a significant form of doxastic control, we learn something interesting about the nature of belief if we learn that it's possible to believe at will. So, even if epistemically rational belief at will isn't possible, it doesn't follow *just from this* that the arguments in §§1-4 don't establish anything interesting.

This is the first thing to say in response to Sylvan's conclusion. The more important point, however, is that it's hard to see why Sylvan thinks that a belief formed at will must be epistemically irrational. On Sylvan's view, in the situation we have been considering all along, either I am rationally required to believe that Jones did it, or I am rationally required to suspend judgment on this proposition. It's consistent with Sylvan's view that I am rationally required believe that Jones

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<sup>15</sup> According to Sosa (2015: 74), when you go to your annual eye exam and make an educated guess that (for example) the fourth letter on the sixth row is an 'F,' your guess might be a genuine belief, and it might even amount to animal knowledge. But of course, *guessing* that the letter is an 'F' is clearly something you can do at will. It's also worth noting how often epistemologists use lucky guesses as examples of unjustified true belief (or at least true belief without knowledge). Consider the following passage from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on the analysis of knowledge, for example: "Suppose that William flips a coin, and confidently believes—on no particular basis—that it will land tails. If by chance the coin does land tails, then William's belief was true; but a lucky guess such as this one is not knowledge." Here it's taken completely for granted that a guess can be a genuine belief. Or, for another example, consider this passage from Lemos's *An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*: "True beliefs that are mere lucky guesses or mere hunches or based on wild superstitions are not instances of knowledge" (2007: 6). Again, a lucky guess is supposed to give us a clear example of *belief* that falls short of knowledge. But if this is right, then guessing at will can be a way of believing at will.

did it, so assume that this is true. Then it follows that, if I believe *at will* that Jones did it, then I do *at will* exactly what epistemic rationality requires. So why does Sylvan think that, because permissive situations aren't possible, if I believe at will that Jones did it, then my belief that she did it can't be epistemically rational?

Sylvan doesn't say. He seems to think it's just obvious that, if permissive situations aren't possible, then any belief formed at will would be epistemically irrational. But perhaps, if pressed, he would give something like the following argument: *If my total evidence makes belief in p rationally obligatory and I don't find myself compelled to believe p, then there's something wrong with me cognitively, and I'm epistemically irrational in something like Plantinga's proper functionalist sense (1993: 136-7). On the other hand, if my total evidence makes belief in p rationally obligatory and I do find myself compelled to believe p, then I won't be in position to believe p at will. So, either way, we won't have a case of epistemically rational belief at will.* So far as I can tell, something like this is the best reason for agreeing with Sylvan that, if permissive situations aren't possible, then epistemically rational belief at will isn't possible either. But the second premise of this argument is disputable (see Steup 2017, for example), and it's first premise seems unmotivated anyway. If being rationally required to believe *p* were *luminous* in Williamson's (2000) sense, then it might be plausible that I'm not functioning properly if my total evidence makes belief in *p* rationally obligatory and I don't feel compelled to believe *p*. But it's doubtful that my being rationally required to believe *p* is luminous (ibid: ch. 4), and I see no other reason to accept the first premise of this argument.

As a consequence, I see no reason why we should agree with Sylvan that, because permissive situations aren't possible, any belief formed at will would be epistemically irrational.<sup>16</sup> And of course, if Sylvan is wrong and permissive situations *are* possible, then it's even more plausible that a belief formed at will might be epistemically rational. Either way, I see no way to argue that, while belief at will is possible when the relevant person thinks she's in a permissive situation, *epistemically rational* belief at will is still impossible. The upshot is that, if belief at will is possible, there seems no reason why it couldn't be epistemically rational. And even if it couldn't be epistemically rational, it seems dogmatic to continue insisting that it's impossible. Either way, involuntarism should lose its grip on contemporary epistemology.

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<sup>16</sup> Perhaps Sylvan only means to suggest that, because permissive situations aren't possible, in any situation where belief at will is epistemically rational, suspending at will would be epistemically irrational. If so, then I agree with him. But of course, it doesn't follow from *this* that the ability to believe at will doesn't "constitute a significant form of doxastic control" (p. 1659).

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