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A New Rejection of Doxastic Voluntarism

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RESUMEN

El artículo supone un rechazo del voluntarismo doxástico. Tras considerar un tipo de casos que Carl Ginet presenta como ejemplos claros de adquisición voluntaria de creencia, propongo una explicación alternativa basada en la noción de aceptación y definiendo la distinción entre creencia y aceptación como una consecuencia del mismo concepto de creencia. Mi tesis es que cuando alguien reconoce que determinados estados evidenciales muestran que p , inmediatamente cree que p . En particular, definiendo esta inmediatez de la creencia mediante una analogía entre creer y comprender. En las dos últimas secciones trato de mostrar la fundamental voluntariedad de intenciones y aceptaciones, en contraste con las creencias, y ofrezco una explicación para las “creencias recalcitrantes” armónica con mi planteamiento.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *voluntarismo doxástico, creencia, aceptación, intención, voluntariedad, recalcitrante.*

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an argument against doxastic voluntarism. After discussing the sort of cases adduced by Carl Ginet as clear examples of voluntary belief-acquisition, I propose an alternative explanation based on the notion of acceptance and offer a defence of the belief/acceptance distinction as a consequence of the concept of belief. My general contention is: when someone acknowledges some evidential states or doxastic reasons as showing that p , she immediately believes that p . I argue for this immediacy in believing and draw an analogy between believing and understanding. The last sections are devoted to showing the fundamental voluntariness of intention and acceptance, in contrast to belief, and to offering an explanation of “recalcitrant beliefs” within the present framework.

KEYWORDS: *Doxastic Voluntarism, Belief, Acceptance, Intention, Voluntariness, Recalcitrance.*

I. THE ISSUE

Doxastic voluntarism is the claim according to which it is *possible* to believe *at will*; i.e. to decide to believe and thereby to be immediately and di-

rectly believing, regardless of the evidence or epistemic reasons for it.¹ But some qualifications are in order here.

First of all, the doxastic voluntarist does not commit herself to the implausible idea that every belief of an agent is due to voluntary decisions, or that we can believe anything simply by wanting to. The interesting claim of doxastic voluntarism is that it is possible *in some sort of situations* to acquire a belief at will, or as a product of a voluntary decision. Therefore, specification of the sort of cases to which the possibility of believing voluntarily is restricted is crucial, as is the clarification of what is meant here by “at will” or “voluntary decision”.

In particular, the sort of voluntarist that I mainly wish to deal with restricts the scope of cases to these:

- (DV) In cases in which there is the same evidence in favour of and against p and not- p , a subject S can *decide to believe* p or not- p (and not simply suspend judgment).

It is worth saying that a subject’s evidence consists here of her *evidential states*, viz. mental states whose source can be in sense experience, introspection, memory, and (broadly) logical intuition. On the other hand, the discussion has also been framed in terms of reasons. In this alternative formulation, the voluntarist claim is that the subject can *decide to believe*, in some situations, in virtue of non-doxastic reasons. I will use the expressions “evidence”, “evidential states” and “doxastic” or “epistemic reasons” interchangeably.

Contrarily, the anti-voluntarist claims that:

- (AV) A subject S can come to believe no more and no less than what is permitted by her actual evidential states (doxastic reasons).

(AV) implies that one cannot *believe at will* or *decide to believe*, granted that for deciding to believe, in the relevant sense, it is necessary that one can come to believe either p or not- p in virtue of the same evidence or doxastic reasons. The idea is that you can believe only what is dictated by your evidential states (doxastic reasons). (Indeed, if that kind of voluntarism turned out to be right, I do not see why we should restrict the possibility of voluntary belief formation only to cases in which evidence for p and evidence for not- p tie. It would be more plausible to state: a subject S can (decide to) believe in every case in which her evidence for p is insufficient and S has, in addition, non-doxastic reasons that make believing that p better for her than believing that not- p , or simply not believing that p . However, I put this remark aside, in so far as it will not affect the results of the present discussion.)

In what follows I will be arguing against doxastic voluntarism, as characterized. I will start by focussing on a recent defence by Carl Ginet. He pro-

poses several cases that fit the previous DV scheme. In section III, I will offer an alternative explanation of the sort of cases that denies that the subjects involved really decided to believe. All that the subject's act justifies us to infer is that S took *p* as true, and in order to take *p* as true it is not necessary that S believes that *p*. Indeed, we ordinarily take propositional contents as plausible assumptions or suppositions. In section IV I will take into account the plausible voluntarist reply of refusing the belief/acceptance distinction as *ad hoc* and detached from our folk dispositionalist account of belief. In response I will defend the distinction as a consequence of the concept of belief, in line with Bernard Williams' idea that *belief aims at truth*. In particular, I will argue for immediacy in believing, i.e. when someone acknowledges some evidential states or doxastic reasons as showing that *p*, by that same acknowledgment she immediately believes that *p*. I will draw an analogy between believing and understanding. In section V I will argue for the fundamental voluntariness of intention and acceptance in contrast to belief. Finally, in section VI I will address the problem of "recalcitrant beliefs", i.e. beliefs that appear to be immune to evidential changes and will sketch a way in which they might be explained within the present framework.

II. DECIDING TO BELIEVE

In a recent paper, Carl Ginet has argued for doxastic voluntarism presenting examples of cases in which the involved subjects can putatively *decide* to believe that *p* or not-*p*, regardless of their evidential states, that is, for non-doxastic reasons. In these cases, the subject would decide to believe that *p* (or not-*p*) in response to non-epistemic or practical reasons, given that the evidence is not conclusive. To restate: the subject decides to voluntarily adopt a belief, although what ultimately resolves the decision is not evidential difference (by hypothesis in all cases the agent has the same evidence in favour of both options), but practical reasons. Let us look at some cases.

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

Case 2. Will he remember to bring the book? Before Sam left for his office this morning, Sue asked him to bring from his office, when he comes back, a particular book that she needs to use in preparing for her

lecture the next day. Later Sue wonders whether Sam will remember to bring the book. She recalls that he has sometimes, though not often, forgotten such things, but, *given the inconvenience of getting in touch with him and interrupting his work and the thought that her continuing to wonder whether he'll remember it will make her anxious all day, she decides to stop fretting and believe that he will remember to bring it.*

Case 3 – Did I lock the door? We have started on a trip by car, and 50 miles from home my wife asks me if I locked the door. I seem to remember that I did, but I don't have a clear, detailed, confident memory impression of locking that door (and I am aware that my unclear, unconfident memory impressions have sometimes been mistaken). But, *given the great inconvenience of turning back to make sure and the undesirability of worrying about it while continuing on, I decide to continue on and believe that I did lock it.* [Ginet (2001), p. 64; my emphasis].²

Let us acknowledge that ordinarily we say things like, e.g., “why don't you want to believe me” or “please, believe me,” that sound voluntarist. Indeed a good deal of epistemological conceptualization also sounds clearly voluntarist.³ However, the existence of voluntarist ways of talking and conceptualization does not necessarily involve that we can truly adopt beliefs voluntarily. This putative fact requires an independent defence.

In particular, in the cases presented by Ginet the subjects seem to be taking a decision about how to set up their evidence in virtue of practical interests, i.e. interests concerning how to act according to costs and benefits and given the insufficiency of their evidence or doxastic reasons. Moreover, it may be worth noting that those situations fit the conditions of what William James called *genuine option scenarios*.⁴ The subjects have *live options*, both for believing or not believing, for instance, that Sam will remember to bring the book, or that the door was locked, are exclusive alternatives seen as equally possible by the subject. Likewise, they are *forced options*, for not to decide would be the same as to opt for one of the alternatives; and *momentous options*, given that opting for one or the other constitutes a real and significant difference for the subject, such as to cancel the trip. We can dub this sort of voluntarism *pragmatic voluntarism*, because it restricts the possibility of voluntarist belief-acquisition to cases of practical necessity. In cases of this sort, the agent needs to take a decision in order to act, inaction being not a realistic alternative. Indeed, this is probably the strongest (or one of the strongest) motives for voluntarism, and we should not despise it. In all the previous examples, according to Ginet, S decided to believe a certain proposition *p*; and S did this in deciding to act, or not to act, in a certain way. For instance, in case 3, in deciding to continue on down the road without worrying about it, the subject decided to believe that she had locked the door.

Ginet offers the following explanation of *deciding to believe*:

In deciding to A, S decided to believe that p iff in deciding to A, S decided to count on its being the case that p . [Ginet (2001), p. 67].

Where the notion of “*counting on its being the case that p* ” entails:

- (1) staking something on its being the case that p , plus
- (2) adopting a dismissive or complacent attitude toward the possibility of losing what one has staked on p because of its turning out that not- p .

Ginet explains (1) in the following way:

In deciding to A, S staked something on its being the case that p iff when deciding to A, S believed that A-ing was (all things considered) at least as good as other options open to her iff p (equivalently: that no other option open to her was preferable to A-ing iff p ; or, for short, that A-ing was optimal iff p) [Ginet (2001), p. 65].

But staking something on its being the case that p is not sufficient for deciding to believe that p . Ginet takes into account that the subjects in the examples might just have staked something on its being the case that p , without deciding to believe that p . In case 2, Sue might have decided not to remind Sam about the book but also not to count on his remembering it and to think about what to do should he forget it. Or, in case 3, the subject might have decided to continue on without believing that the door was locked, but then she would continue to worry about the possibility of it not being locked and be prepared to find it unlocked when returning. But, according to Ginet, they actually decided to believe, and for coming to believe (2) is also necessary, namely the adoption of “a dismissive or complacent attitude toward the possibility of losing what one has staked on p because of its turning out that not- p , an attitude that a mere gambler on p does not adopt. It is to not prepare oneself for the possibility of not- p .” [Ginet (2001), p. 65] And this not preparing oneself for the possibility of not- p “is to not think about the possibility of not- p or at least not to give any consideration on what to do if not- p ” [Ginet (2001), p. 66].

Yet it is unclear what not being prepared for the possibility of not- p amounts to, neither then is what the real difference is between the previous examples and a mere gambler’s case, for instance someone merely staking something on a coin’s landing heads up. It seems that merely relying on the fact that the subject be surprised if not- p is too weak. In explaining the examples I would rather say that, if evidence is *ex hypothesi* insufficient, the subjects cannot simply acquire a belief, but just stake on its being the case that p , in Ginet’s

expression. Doubtless, there are extra-evidential considerations (non-evidential states, non-epistemic reasons) that may do better for the agent to believe p rather than not- p , but those considerations cannot bear on the question whether p . In the next section, I will offer an alternative explanation for *genuine option scenarios*, which avoids voluntarist commitments. Subsequently, I will argue for the superiority of this alternative explanation in that it meets important conceptual conditions that voluntarism cannot help violating.

III. BELIEF AND ACCEPTANCE

It appears that all that the subjects' act strictly justifies us to infer is that S took p as if true, and in order to take p as if true it is not necessary, as seems clear, that S believes that p . Indeed, we ordinarily take propositional contents as plausible assumptions or suppositions that may support intentions and plans for (actual or possible) action, in addition to merely theoretical aims. Of course, taking a proposition as the content for attitudes such as supposing, assuming, hypothesizing or positing, does not entail that we believe the proposition. Indeed, for instance, the very task of proposing a hypothesis and trying to prove it presupposes that one does not already believe it. This set of propositional attitudes take their content, instead of "as true", as is the case in believing, *as if true*.

We can make this idea clearer by using the notion of "acceptance", proposed by several authors.⁵ I find Cohen's elaboration particularly useful. According to him,

to accept that p is to have or to adopt a policy of deeming, positing, or postulating that p , i.e. of including that proposition or rule among one's premises for deciding what to do or think in a particular context, whether or not one feels it to be true that p [Cohen (1992), p. 4].

Acceptance is pragmatically oriented in the sense that, even though the evidence for whether p is insufficient, it can be more rational on the whole (for a subject S , in a situation s and a time t) to accept that p than not to, in virtue of practical reasons. And we can accept propositions we do not believe. Crucial features of this notion for our question are, then, the plurality of reasons that can guide it and (as a consequence of this) its voluntary nature.

We can now re-describe the *genuine option scenarios*. In these cases, the hypotheses in confrontation do not contradict the evidence, but the evidence is insufficient to decide the issue. However, the subjects cannot simply suspend their judgment, for they are in need of forming intentions for action – as noted, the motivation for the kind of doxastic voluntarism at issue is pragmatic. What the subjects really do then is to adopt a positive attitude to-

wards one of the hypotheses. They *accept* a propositional content as a plausible assumption or supposition that can ground inferences and intentions and plans for (actual or possible) action. Inferences and intentions for action do not need to be based on beliefs, but merely on accepted contents or cognitive attitudes,⁶ and one can *accept* a propositional content regardless of its insufficient evidential support. The acceptance itself, qua acceptance, can ground inferences and intentions for action.

The inconvenience of going on worrying about something one cannot help, as well as the prospect of feeling a continued useless anxiety, are good practical reasons for supposing or accepting that the front door is locked and forming intentions for action based on that supposition or acceptance. However, this fact does not change S's doxastic attitude toward *p* – a lack of sufficient evidence in favour of *p* prevents S from coming to believe that *p*. The subject's attitude can vary only in the case of gathering further unbalancing evidence. In that case, acceptance may turn into belief or eventually be rejected, and intentions and plans could subsequently require revision and readjustment.

To sum up this point, when evidence is clearly insufficient, a good hypothesis formed (mainly), in virtue of instrumental, prudential, moral or merely volitive reasons, can give ground to inferences and policies. This is the schema:

S accepts that *p*, for non-doxastic reasons, as a ground for her intention to φ iff S adopts the intention to φ in virtue of assuming that *p*, without having sufficient doxastic reasons/evidence to believe that *p* (and, then, not believing that *p*).

Notice that S *accepts* that *p* for non-doxastic reasons, but does not believe for non-doxastic reasons. Again, there is no problem with the fact that a proposition be accepted as a ground for intentions without being believed by the subject; its acceptance is sufficient. And still, denying belief status to a cognitive attitude does not have to bring about significant behavioural differences.

Then, we can say that, in the previous cases, what S did by deciding to act in a certain way was to accept that *p*. This alternative explanation is sufficient to give vent to the pragmatic motivations for doxastic voluntarism.

It has to be said that a happy consequence of my proposal in this section – in which, no doubt, its truth does not lie – is that, when one only provisionally accepts a proposition *p*, the obligation of continuing to seek more evidence, as far as possible, for *p* will still be as pressing as before. In contrast, when someone comes to believe that *p* she stops actively searching for more evidence for *p*, unless some further reasons were to reintroduce doubt.

IV. THE CONSTITUTIVE AIM OF BELIEF

However, the voluntarist is very likely to reject this re-interpretation insisting on the idea that the subjects in the examples *decided to believe*. In particular, as noticed, Ginet stresses that they might just have staked something on its being the case that *p*, as in the case of mere gambling; but actually they decided to believe that *p*, by adopting a dismissive attitude towards the possibility of not-*p*. For instance, in case 1 Sam decided to believe the witness' exonerating testimony and dismissed the possibility that the exonerating testimony was false.

Otherwise, a counterargument for doxastic voluntarism in a dispositionalist vein may run as follows. Accepting a proposition is being disposed to act as if that proposition were true. But believing a proposition is itself nothing more or less than being disposed to act as if the proposition were true. So, it must be concluded, accepting a proposition is the same as believing it.⁷ Indeed, it seems that the crucial distinction between taking *p* as true and taking *p* as if true needs further clarification and defence.⁸ Moreover, a common-sense explanation of action simply makes use of beliefs and desires (the belief/desire scheme) in explaining purposive action, particularly disregarding acceptances. In these explanations, whose clearest cases are those in which we explain children's and animals' action, and others' behaviour in general, the only elements considered are beliefs and desires.

Having these remarks in mind, the notion of acceptance appears to be especially designed to avoid voluntarism; to the extent that the very distinction between belief and acceptance seems to be an *ad hoc* distinction. I acknowledge that the distinction by itself cannot solve the debate. What is needed is a direct argument (grounded on the very concept of belief) for the impossibility of believing at will. If we do manage to find such an argument, the belief/acceptance distinction will follow.

In order to construct a direct argument for the impossibility of believing at will or deciding to believe, the fundamental source is, doubtless, Bernard Williams' (1973) famous argument, whose key idea is that *belief aims at truth*. This is the most often-quoted fragment of his argument:

If I could acquire a belief at will, 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 [Williams (1973), p. 148].

As noted in the literature, the steps of Williams' argument are less than completely clear. Doubtless, the argument's goal is not to deny that we can acquire false beliefs, but that it is impossible to acquire a belief independently of *holding it true*.⁹ Anyway, I do not want to go into the argument's details,

but to stress its main point: that one cannot consciously acquire a belief irrespective of its aiming at truth or its purpose of representing reality. What I want to propose is a specific interpretation of this idea.

To begin with, this is a claim about the very nature of belief. The argument should not be interpreted, particularly, as saying that one cannot acquire a belief without caring at all whether it is true or not, in the sense of *having a desire that it be true*. That is, that one cannot acquire a belief without having a parallel explicit concern for the truth of that belief. That desire or concern is neither sufficient nor necessary for coming to believe. Indeed, as Ginet cunningly remarks, in his examples S no doubt has the desire that *p* were true; indeed, that is what putatively makes her believe that *p*. On the other hand, I form most of my beliefs without consciously thinking about their truth.

What we are looking for is an argument based on the very concept of belief, from which it would result that is not simply *contingently* impossible, but incoherent or logically impossible, to believe at will. In order to make this explicit, let us apply Moore's Paradox to the situations of the previous cases' subjects.

It seems that *deciding* to believe in view of insufficient evidence would involve, if one were asked, to assert (sincerely) something like this:

I believe that *p*, but my evidence does not support *p* more than not-*p*.

And this is dangerously akin (though, it seems, not identical) to Moore's Paradox, in which someone sincerely asserts:

I believe that *p*, but not *p*.

This seems absurd, as Moore maintained.¹⁰ (No doubt, this is clearly different to "I believe that *p*, but I am not certain about *p*", or even "I believe that *p*, but I doubt whether *p*" – not a worry for a gradual or non-certainty-based conception of belief.) However, this seems insufficient to show the incoherence of believing at will.

Alternatively, we can appeal to the notion of *transparency*. Transparency, regarding our topic, is the idea that doxastic deliberation, that is deliberation about whether I believe that *p*, is *transparent* to the question whether *p*. As Richard Moran has insisted, we treat the question "Do I believe that *p*?" much as the corresponding question "Is *p* true?," a question which involves no essential reference to oneself at all [Moran (2001), pp. 60-3. See also Evans (1982), p. 225]. However, as Moran argues, "[r]ather than being guaranteed by logic, [...] conforming to transparency [is] a normative demand" [Moran 2001, p. xvi]. That is, transparency is a feature of *ordinary* first-personal discourse; "it is no more than ordinary," and it often does fail. It is, in short, a *rationality condition* – i.e. a *normative* condition –, which may and may not obtain. But,

then, transparency cannot do the work of precluding the possibility of acquiring beliefs at will. More than a mere rationality condition is required for rebutting doxastic voluntarism. We need, instead, a *conceptual constraint*.

Specifically, the key idea that belief *constitutively* aims at truth, or purports to represent reality, as an internal constraint of the very concept of belief, has to be explained on the following lines:

A content *p* in my mind that I see as not aiming at truth or representing reality (in the sense of currently being the case) cannot count as a belief of mine.

On the one hand, reasons for believing can only be doxastic or evidential reasons, because these are the only reasons about *p*'s truth, about being the case that *p*. On the other hand, there is a relationship of immediacy between belief and evidential grounds for believing. When someone acknowledges reasons or evidence for *p*, by that same acknowledgment she immediately, *eo ipso*, believes that *p*.¹¹ One's attitude of believing always follows (proportionally) one's acknowledgement of the grounds for believing. In this process the will can add nothing. There is no intermediate act between the acknowledgement of the grounds for believing and the attitude of believing. This contrasts with Ginet's cases, or, better, Ginet's interpretation of his own cases, in which the subject *decided* to go beyond the evidence, beyond what is currently supported by her doxastic reasons; but that is literally impossible.

I find it useful to highlight a significant analogy between believing and understanding. One does not decide to understand just as one does not decide to believe. As there are different ways of acquiring a belief, there are different ways of coming to understand. Some ways of coming to understand and believe are more instantaneous, as happens with perceptual beliefs, and others require more intellectual elaboration. You may need to reflect more or less on the information about a certain topic available to you. Indeed, you may set up various pieces of information differently, and then, in a particular arrangement, grasp or come to understand something. But this coming to understand is involuntary and immediate. It is not in your hands not to understand or to understand something different, and it is by recognizing some reasons that one comes to understand. This is the same for belief. When you grasp some reasons as supporting *p*, you *eo ipso* believe that *p*. Of course, this is simply an analogy; understanding and believing are no doubt different things.

In contrast, accepting that *p*, or supposing, assuming, hypothesizing or positing that *p* are not subject to *it* being the case that *p*, in the way believing is. They are also, most of the time, truth-oriented, but in an indirect way that contrasts with the direct connection between belief and truth. In particular, we cannot believe something for the sake of argument, as we can suppose, assume or accept it.

In this section I have been pursuing, after Williams, the idea that, given the nature of belief, the possibility of deciding to believe is in itself incoherent. Moreover, I have been arguing for immediacy in coming to believe. So my argument mixes conceptual and phenomenological aspects of believing. I regard this as a response to the pragmatist charge of the *ad hoc* character of the belief/acceptance distinction. However, something has still to be said about the idea of the voluntary. I devote the next section to this issue.

V. ON VOLUNTARINESS

The term ‘voluntary’ is significantly ambiguous. It seems that its primary use refers to actions and, especially, to our behaviour not being externally forced or determined (by other agents). In this sense, our beliefs are voluntary as much as we acquire them, as normally, without any sort of (extraordinary) physical or intellectual coercion. On the other hand, ‘involuntary’ can apply to the functioning of our organs; as when, for instance, we say that the beating of our heart is involuntary. Of course, this is neither the sense in which beliefs are involuntary. It seems to me that a good way of specifying the sense in which our beliefs are involuntary is to contrast them with the voluntary nature of intentions and acceptances. In order to do this, I want to compare my account of the involuntariness of belief to Pamela Hieronymi’s (2006). It is worth noting that to a large extent my proposal agrees with hers; but, in my view, she goes too far with the idea of the involuntariness of some of our attitudes. The defence of the fundamentally voluntary nature of intention and acceptance is significant for my overall argument against doxastic voluntarism.

Particularly, Hieronymi argues for what she calls the notion of “commitment-constituted attitudes,” according to which propositional attitudes such as beliefs and intentions are involuntary so far as we necessarily acquire them in response to constitutive reasons, reasons that bear on whether p or to φ . To believe that p is to have settled for oneself the question whether p , i.e. whether p is the case or true (from one’s perspective), and one cannot settle that question for reasons which one takes to bear only on the question of whether believing p is good. That is why belief is non-voluntary. In parallel, to intend to φ is to have settled for oneself the question whether to φ , but – according to Hieronymi – one cannot settle that question for reasons which one takes to bear only on the distinct question whether intending to φ is in some way good to do. In this sense, intending is also non-voluntary.¹²

The argument might be equally extended to acceptance. The general idea regarding “commitment-constituted attitudes” is that, because one can only settle a question for reasons one takes to bear on it, attitudes that embody one’s answer to some (range of) question(s) can only be formed or re-

vised for reasons one takes to bear on the relevant question(s). That is the sense, for Hieronymi, in which this sort of attitudes is non-voluntary.

However, it seems to me that there is a fundamental difference between belief and intention or acceptance regarding their relationship to the will. Considerations about the goodness of its being the case that p are irrelevant to the question of believing that p ; whereas considerations about the goodness of φ -ing are, at least, part of the question whether to φ , i.e. are reasons for intending to φ . In other words, in the case of believing, we cannot take into account all the reasons we have, because belief is only responsive to doxastic reasons. So reasons for believing are a subclass of the total class of reasons a person has, whereas reasons of no kind are principled precluded from being taken into account regarding intention and acceptance. Both sorts of reasons, doxastic and practical, are potentially reasons to intend or accept. There is no correlate to *doxastic reasons* in the realms of intention and acceptance, unless it is practical reasons, which are precisely the kind of reasons that typically define voluntariness.¹³

I can grant that, in the end, the non-voluntary character of intention (or acceptance), in Hieronymi's sense, may be conceptually true, but trivial; whereas the non-voluntariness of belief is substantive and philosophically crucial. This is due to the fact that *belief aims at truth*, which imposes a special substantive (conceptual) constraint on the nature of belief that is simply absent in the case of intention or acceptance.

VI. RECALCITRANCE

Before moving onto the concluding remarks, I wish to consider a potential objection to the account of believing that I have proposed, which comes from the so-called phenomenon of "recalcitrant belief".¹⁴

Recalcitrant beliefs are beliefs that appear to be immune to evidential changes. To understand this phenomenon, let us look at the parallel and more familiar phenomenon of recalcitrant emotion. Common accounts usually define emotions as consisting in, or being dependent of, judgments or perceptions. It does not matter here what account one favours. The point is that to feel an emotion is, at least, dependent of the subject's appraisal of some environmental feature. However, there are cases in which the emotional response is not responsive to the subject's appraisal. Think, for instance, of fear. One normally feels fear when one judges or perceives something as dangerous; however one can also feel fear when seeing a mouse, even though one judges mice as not dangerous. In parallel, there seem to be cases in which, although one's belief depends on some piece of evidence, the discredit of that piece of evidence does not result in withdrawing that belief.¹⁵ Or also cases in which some doxastic reasons are presented to a subject, she appears to acknowledge

the weight of the reasons, but no change in her beliefs (dependent upon those reasons) occurs. Imagine, for instance, a mother who is visited by a policeman, who reports to her that her son has been fatally injured in a car accident.¹⁶ She normally acknowledges information coming from a public authority, indeed she acknowledges the policeman's report, but she does not believe that her son is dead. At least, she does not form that belief immediately. Or think of another case of a person visiting a psychoanalyst. After studying the case, the psychoanalyst finds out and reveals to the person the pathological cause of some of his beliefs. He, the patient, endorses the diagnosis, so appearing to acknowledge the evidence, but he does not change his beliefs despite their endorsed irrationality – at least, not immediately. It appears that belief has its particular inertia. It takes time to change some beliefs.

In all these cases it seems that beliefs are not responsive to doxastic reasons. But I claimed that when someone acknowledges some reasons or evidence as supporting that *p*, by that same acknowledgment she immediately (*ipso facto*) believes that *p*. Then, cases of recalcitrant belief, in which someone acknowledges some evidence but does not immediately acquire or modify the evidence-related belief according to that evidence, appear to be counterexamples. In particular, this might be an objection insofar as my account relies on a conceptual constraint upon belief, obtaining in all cases.

However, those cases may be explained in a way that fits my central claim. First of all, one can acknowledge some reasons as supporting that *p*, but not being determinant regarding whether *p*. Or one can also acknowledge some reasons for *p*, that in some circumstances show that *p*, but other reasons for not-*p*, that in some circumstances show that not-*p*. As a result, one will maintain an unstable relationship to *p*. Indeed you can remain ambivalent concerning whether *p*. But this fact may be adequately explained making use of the notion of acceptance. Both the mother and the patient resist changing their beliefs. Indeed, they have accepted respectively the policeman's disturbing report and the doctor's diagnosis, but have not really assimilated the reasons that discredit the beliefs in question.¹⁷

On the other hand, it seems that, against my diagnosis, in those cases acceptance is more responsive to doxastic reasons (and so truth-aiming or conducive) than beliefs. However, the only thing shown by this phenomenon is that belief-revision is not as abrupt as acceptance can be. Particular beliefs are strongly dependent on other beliefs in the subject's whole web of beliefs in which they are located, as well as on her other attitudes and mental states. And that is independent of the subject's will.¹⁸ For example, someone who is informed that her friend, who was supposed to be really ill, has recovered may accept the informer's report with no change in her beliefs – although her will is that her friend recovers from illness. In short, our belief-revision mechanism has its own economy.

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Let us come back to the initial *genuine option scenarios*. We can now say that in those scenarios the subject is in a situation in which she desires or wants to believe that p , but her evidence is insufficient for p , or her doxastic reasons do not support p more than not- p . Then, the subject accepts that p and adopts a policy based on this acceptance.

The subject could try to make an effort of will: “I *will believe* that p .” But this does not immediately bring about a belief. The verbal tense is crucial: it displays not a current belief, but a future-directed policy. Indeed, what is meant by “I will believe” is that “I will act as if p were the case”. This is simply a case of acceptance, an attitude that, no doubt, can in time lead to a belief, though not necessarily. Indeed, the possibility of acquiring a belief at will (for practical reasons) *indirectly*, i.e. by means of carrying out intermediate actions, is relatively uncontroversial. No doubt, one can *bring* oneself to believe something by means of engaging in different activities conducive to that aim.¹⁹ However, there is a constraint: that, at the end, one believes that p because one thinks that p is the case. And this happens when the subject discovers further evidence in favour of p . On the other hand, I have tried to show that we need an independent conceptual argument for the impossibility of *deciding to believe*, on the concept of belief, different from conditions of rationality for doxastic deliberation. I have drawn on William’s classic argument and have stressed the idea of *immediacy*. I have also argued for the fundamental disanalogy between belief and other attitudes such as intention and acceptance regarding their connection with the will. Finally, I have discarded a possible objection based on the phenomenon of recalcitrant belief.²⁰

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NOTES

¹ Strictly speaking, this should be called *Direct Doxastic Voluntarism*. In what follows, by Doxastic Voluntarism, I will be referring to Direct Doxastic Voluntarism. I will have something (very little) to say about *Indirect Doxastic Voluntarism* in the last section.

² Ginet gives a fourth example (his case 2) on bluffing in playing poker. I have changed the cases’ original numbers.

³ See Heal (1983), pp. 355-7, for a remark of this sort.

⁴ In ‘The Will to Believe’ (1896), James famously maintained that it is not necessary to have *complete* evidence in order to believe justifiedly. When we are in front of two incompatible “hypotheses”, which make up a “genuine option”, we can decide to believe one or the other.

⁵ See especially Stalnaker (1984), Cohen (1992), and Bratman (1992). There are two general ways of construing this notion. The main contrast is between considering acceptance as a particular propositional attitude, like in Cohen’s and Bratman’s model, or as a “generic propositional attitude concept”, like in Stalnaker’s model. Stalnaker states: “Acceptance, as I shall use this term, is a *broader concept than belief*; it is a generic propositional attitude concept with such notions as presupposing, presuming, postulating, positing, assuming and supposing falling under it. [...] To accept a proposition is *to treat it as a true proposition* in one way or another – to ignore, for the moment at least, the possibility that it is false. [...] To accept a proposition is *to act, in certain respects, as if one believed it*” [Stalnaker (1984), pp. 79-80].

⁶ Beliefs are only a sort of cognitive attitudes – which contrast with the class of conative attitudes (desires, intentions, goals, etc.) This is a classical distinction.

⁷ See Mahler (1990), p. 381, for a presentation of an argument of this sort.

⁸ Indeed, to adequately characterize such a distinction is more difficult than it seems at first glance. See Velleman (2000) for this point.

⁹ See Bennett (1990).

¹⁰ See Moore (1912), p. 125.

¹¹ For a related but different notion of immediacy in believing, see Bennett (1990). Closer to my notion is Pamela Hieronymi’s conception of immediacy as a relation between answering a question and having an attitude. See Hieronymi (2006), pp. 53-4 and n. 28.

¹² This is mainly contained in Hieronymi (2006), sect. V. See also Hieronymi (2008), sect. 3, for her general account of voluntariness.

¹³ Compare Bennett (1990), who defines voluntariness as “responsiveness to practical reasons... Actions are voluntary in that sense, and beliefs seem not to be.” [p. 90.]

¹⁴ I take this expression from Montmarquet (1993), p. 94.

¹⁵ Harman discusses cases in which subjects continue having a belief although the evidence that brought it about is discredited. See Harman (1986), chap. 4.

¹⁶ My apologies for presenting such an example.

¹⁷ In section III, I remained uncommitted to either of the two particular models of construing the notion of acceptance: the *Cohen-Bratman model*, for which acceptance is a particular kind of propositional attitude, and *Stalnaker’s model*, for which acceptance is a generic propositional-attitude concept that covers the notions of presupposing, presuming, postulating, positing, assuming, supposing, pretending and the like. However, cases like the one considered in this paragraph appear to favour the former model, so long as the mother’s and the patient’s acceptance has to be distinguished from mere supposition or pretence. As Bratman writes, “Context-relative acceptance is tied more directly to action than is mere supposition; and it is tied more directly to practical reasoning than is mere pretence.” “Suppose I had a million dollars’, I ask myself. ‘What should I do with it?’ Such a question may trigger contingency planning based on the mere supposition that I have such wealth. But this planning will not directly shape my action” [Bratman (1992), p. 9].

¹⁸ No doubt, belief-acquisition can be subject to passional influences or to phenomena such as wishful thinking or even self-deception, but this is very different from the conscious intervention of the agent's will.

¹⁹ This is what (in footnote 1) was called Indirect Doxastic Voluntarism. For illustrations of cases of this sort, see Alston (1989) and Feldman (2001).

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