ACQUIRING BELIEFS AT WILL

Barbara Winters

April 20, 1978
ABSTRACT

The paper considers the question of whether it is possible to acquire beliefs at will, i.e. directly, simply as the result of willing to do so. In particular, it discusses an argument of Bernard Williams in "Deciding to Believe" to the conclusion that it is a necessary truth that one cannot acquire a belief at will. The argument is first clarified and reformulated so as to exhibit the underlying assumptions and explain precisely what he means by "acquiring beliefs at will." The truth of the premises is then examined. Attention is focused on the most important assumption, which is that necessarily, if in full consciousness I will to acquire a belief b irrespective of its truth, then after the event it is impossible that I believe in full consciousness b is a present belief of mine and I acquired b at will. After further clarification of this claim, I argue that whatever plausibility it has results from the plausibility of another claim: Necessarily ~ (3x)(3p)(x believes x believes p and x's belief of p is not sustained by any truth-considerations). I defend the latter claim against apparent counter-examples and show that it is compatible with the possibility conscious irrationality and has important implications. Nevertheless, I argue that even if it is true, other premises of Williams' argument are not plausible and he does not succeed in establishing that we cannot acquire beliefs at will.
Acquiring Beliefs at Will

The question whether acquiring beliefs is a kind of action is an important one; to answer it requires a determination of the extent of our influence on what we come to believe. Can we choose to believe rationally and to acquire our beliefs only when the evidence warrants it? Or is rational belief-acquisition merely an accident of nature over which individuals have no control, so that people should accrue neither merit nor demerit from the way they acquire beliefs? Perhaps some intermediate position of influence is possible.

In his paper "Deciding to Believe"\(^1\), Bernard Williams has offered an argument which has important consequences for this issue. He considers the case of actions which are performed "at will," "just like that," and argues that it is a necessary truth that we cannot arrive at beliefs in the way that we perform such actions. He concludes that we cannot acquire beliefs at will, and he takes the fact that "belief does not respond to the will" to count towards a picture of belief "as a passive phenomenon, something that happens to us" (148).

Williams' argument for this conclusion is subtle and difficult but repays careful examination. Exploration of the issues underlying it requires examination of some of the murky areas surrounding belief-ascription, and insights are revealed which can be helpful in developing an adequate theory of belief-acquisition. In this paper I examine the argument in some detail. I try to show that while it fails to establish that acquiring beliefs at will is impossible, an important insight nevertheless underlies it. I argue that this insight is an instance of a more general truth about the nature of belief-acquisition which has implications for cases other than believing at will.

Preliminary Examination of the Concept

Williams contends that "...it is not a contingent fact that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I believe something, as it is a

---

\(^1\)Work on this paper was partially supported by a 1977 University of California Regents Faculty Fellowship. I want to thank Ronald Scales, Barry Stroud, Mark Wilson and an anonymous reader for Philosophy Research Archives for their helpful comments on an earlier version of the paper.

contingent fact that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I'm blushing" (148). Before examining his argument for this conclusion it is necessary to clarify what he means by "bring[ing] it about, just like that, that I believe something," or—what he takes to come to the same thing—"acquiring beliefs at will." To clarify this concept, he elaborates on the blushing at will example:

What would it be to blush at will? You could put yourself in a situation which you guess would make you blush. That is getting yourself to blush—by a route—but it could not possibly count as blushing at will. Consider next the man who brings it about that he blushes by thinking of an embarrassing scene. That is getting a bit nearer to blushing at will, but it is perhaps best described as making oneself blush at will. The best candidate of all would be somebody who could just blush in much the way that one can hold one's breath. (148)

From the example it seems that the kind of direct believing he has in mind would be an instance of basic action: I would do it directly, not by doing something else. Assuming the situation is the normal one, I act basically, for example, when I raise my hand to answer a question, or bite my fingernail, or shake my head in denial, or tap my toe in time to the music. I do not need to do anything to bring it about that I do these things; I do them directly, simply as the result of my will, just like that. I could, of course, perform these actions nonbasically; suppose that instead of raising my right hand directly, I lift it with my left hand. In that case I have done something to bring it about that my right hand rises, therefore in Williams' sense I have not raised it at will (though I have "made myself [raise it] at will").

An example of basic action in the mental realm is useful. In the normal case, when I am imagining something I do it basically, directly. If I am asked to imagine snow falling or that I am in bed now asleep, I can directly do it. I do not need to get myself to imagine it by doing

---

3Williams is clearly taking blushing to be the phenomenon of turning red, and thereby avoids the objection that blushing at will would not really be blushing at all because blushing is a reaction which must be caused by embarrassment, consternation, or the like.

4I am simplifying the point here in ways inessential to the argument by avoiding the issue raised by Donald Davidson's claim that actions are only basic under a description, and the question of whether neurological events are the only basic actions. See Davidson, "Agency," in Binkley et al. (eds.), Agent, Reason and Action, Toronto University Press, Toronto (1971).
other things. As it might be put, the imagination directly responds to the will. The question Williams raises is whether it would be possible for believing to be like imagining in this respect.

Clarification of the concept of belief at will shows, then, that some of the cases one might think would be instances of it in fact are not. Williams does not deny that having a project of getting oneself to believe something might in fact result in one's coming to hold the belief in question (though he says that such a project would be "very deeply irrational" (150)). For example, one could focus on the favorable data and not on the adverse, try to discredit unfavorable data through considerations of fallibility of testimony, etc., and constantly imagine what it would be like if the belief were true. Such a case would be like that of the man who brings it about that he blushes by thinking of embarrassing scenes. So cases where one succeeds in acquiring a belief as the result of a project, or cases where one does certain things so that one's degree of credence gradually diminishes to the point of no longer amounting to belief, are not cases of acquiring beliefs at will.

The Argument

Williams' argument occurs in the space of one paragraph:

If I could acquire a belief at will, I could acquire it whether it was true or not; moreover I would know that I could acquire it whether it was true or not. If in full consciousness I could will to acquire a 'belief' irrespective of its truth, it is unclear that before the event I could seriously think of it as a belief, i.e. as something purporting to represent reality. At the very least, there must be a restriction on what is the case after the event; since I could not then, in full consciousness, regard this as a belief of mine, i.e. something I take to be true, and also know that I acquired it at will. With regard to no belief could I know—or, if all this is to be done in full consciousness, even suspect—that I had acquired it at will. But if I can acquire beliefs at will, I must know that I am able to do this; and could I know that I was capable of this feat, if with regard to every feat of this kind which I had performed I necessarily had to believe that it had not taken place? (148)

5 Though sometimes I might have to do it non-basically, as, for example, when what I want to imagine is very painful to me, and I can only come to imagine it by leading up to it in imagining other things first.

The argument proceeds from the claim that I cannot have a certain attitude—namely that of regarding a belief of mine as having been acquired at will—to the conclusion that I cannot believe at will. It does so via some intermediate claims: that since I necessarily cannot regard any belief of mine as having been acquired at will it follows that I cannot know I have the ability to believe at will; and that I must know I have the ability if I in fact have it.

It will be useful to reorganize the essential claims in the passage into the form of premises and conclusions. In this reconstruction I continue to use Williams' own words, with some non-essential modifications (e.g., turning his question into a statement). Since the scope of the modal terms is made sufficiently clear by the context so as not to require formal specification, I leave the argument as informally stated, noting that each premise must express a necessary truth if it is to follow that the conclusion is also necessary.

(1) If I could acquire a belief at will, then in full consciousness I could will to acquire a belief irrespective of its truth.

(2) If in full consciousness I could will to acquire a belief irrespective of its truth, then before the event I could not think of it as a belief.

(3) If in full consciousness I could will to acquire a belief irrespective of its truth, then after the event I could not in full consciousness regard it as a belief of mine and also know that I acquired it at will.

(4) Therefore, with regard to no belief could I know that I had acquired it at will.

(5) If with respect to every acquisition of a belief at will I had performed I necessarily had to believe that it did not take place, then I could not know that I was able to acquire beliefs at will.

(6) Therefore, I cannot know that I am able to acquire beliefs at will.

(7) If I can acquire beliefs at will, I must know that I am able to acquire beliefs at will.

(8) Therefore, I cannot acquire beliefs at will.

It is first important to raise some issues about the logical form of the argument. (3) and (4) suggest that the main issue concerns whether or not I could know that I have acquired beliefs at will. But this is misleading. The issue does not involve the truth or the justification for the claim that I have acquired beliefs at will; rather it is
concerned with the possibility of my thinking that I have. It is be­
cause knowledge requires belief that (3) and (4) are true. Note that
the antecedent in (5) makes a claim about belief, not knowledge. If
this antecedent is to be taken to be equivalent to or implied by (4)--
and it must be for (6) to follow from (4) and (5)—then at least in (4)
'know' should be replaced by 'believe', for my not knowing something
does not imply my not believing it. Therefore, (4) should be replaced
by (4'):

(4') Therefore, with regard to no belief could I believe that I had
acquired it at will.

And since it is clear that the intent in (3) is the same, for
clarity (3) should be replaced by (3'):

(3') If in full consciousness I could will to acquire a belief irre­
spective of its truth, then after the event I could not in full
consciousness regard it as a belief of mine and also believe
that I had acquired it at will.

However, even with these substitutions, the argument is not valid as
it stands: (4') still does not imply the antecedent of (5). (4')
claims that I cannot believe I have acquired beliefs at will. The
antecedent of (5) says that I have to believe of every believing at
will that it did not take place. (4') is compatible with my having no
opinion one way or the other about whether I have acquired beliefs at
will; it merely denies the possibility that I believe that I have. The
antecedent of (5), however, states that I believe of every case where I
have acquired a belief at will that it did not take place. The require­
ment of (4'), that I not believe I have, therefore does not imply that
of (5), that I believe I have not.

The revision that best seems to bring the premise in line with
Williams' intention is the weakening of (5), rather than the strength­
ening of (4'); if strengthened (to read, for example, "with respect to
every belief of mine, I must believe that it was not acquired at
will"), (4') will not be implied by (2) and (3). (5) should therefore
be revised to read:

(5') If with respect to every acquisition of a belief at will I had
performed it is necessary that I not believe it took place,
then I could not know that I was able to acquire beliefs at
will.

Having clarified the nature of the argument, it is possible to turn
to an examination of the truth of its premises. I will concentrate on

---

7That Williams has belief in mind is also indicated by his addition
to this claim of "or, if all this is to be done in full consciousness,
even suspect."
the first stage [(1)-(4')]—which attempts to establish that I cannot believe of a belief that I have acquired it at will—wherein the central insight is developed on which the argument mainly rests. After attempting to determine what this insight is and examining its plausibility, I turn to a consideration of the argument's second stage [(5')-(7)], which attempts to show that since I cannot believe of a belief that I have acquired it at will, it is impossible for me to know that I have the ability, and since if I had the ability it would be possible for me to know that I do, I can't believe at will.

The First Stage of the Argument

In support of (1), Williams claims, "If I could acquire a belief at will, I could acquire it whether it was true or not; moreover I would know that I could acquire it whether it was true or not." The context makes it clear that he thinks a further consequence is that I could in full consciousness will to acquire a belief irrespective of its truth. Why does Williams think these consequences follow?

To determine the nature of the argument here, it is first necessary to clarify what Williams means by the phrases "acquiring a belief irrespective of its truth," "whether it is true or not," which he uses interchangeably. This is not as easy as it may seem, for there is an obvious interpretation of these phrases under which all of our beliefs are acquired irrespective of their truth, whether or not they are true--yet this phenomenon is not at all problematic.

As skeptics often remind us, the ways in which we acquire beliefs do not guarantee that we arrive at true beliefs. Therefore, even though we believe of each belief of ours that it is true we know that it is likely that some of them are false. It is a truism that we can come to believe that something is true even though it is actually false, and so come to believe it whether or not it is true. In this sense, each of our beliefs is acquired "irrespective of its truth." But this fact is compatible with both belief and awareness of belief; I can come to believe a proposition (and know that I believe it) while knowing that I acquire my beliefs "whether or not they are true."

Williams clearly has another sense of "irrespective of truth" in mind, since no problem relevant here arises from the fact that the process of belief-acquisition allows acquisition of false beliefs. We can discover this sense by examining more closely the phenomenon of acquiring beliefs at will.

Acquiring a belief at will is acquiring a belief directly, basically. As with other basic actions, I can perform it at will so long as other necessary conditions are fulfilled. I can raise my hand whenever I want (so long as my muscles are operating correctly, I am not physically prevented, etc.). Williams seems to think that similarly, if I could believe at will it would be possible for me to come to believe
whatever I like, whenever I like. Therefore, since I am free to come
to hold any belief I choose, I need not be limited to holding beliefs
which my evidence tends to indicate are true. In fact, the issue of
the truth or falsity of what I propose to believe can be irrelevant to
me. I may instead decide to hold only beliefs which are pleasing to
the mind, or which my friends hold, or which I think will make me
happy. I may even choose my beliefs randomly if I like; it is my free
choice. The important point is that the issue of a proposition's truth
or falsity needn't arise or play any role in my considerations of
whether or not to believe it. To answer the question, "Should I be­
lieve that $p$ is true?" I need not consider "Is $p$ true?" Therefore,
considerations relevant to the truth or falsity of $p$ can be similarly
irrelevant in determining whether or not to believe $p$. So evidence for
or against the truth of $p$ may be disregarded. In order to believe in­
dependently of evidential considerations one need not believe contrary
to one's evidence (one's belief could after all agree with the evi­
dence), rather, it merely must be the case that one does not take into
account considerations relevant to the truth or falsity of $p$ in arriv­
ing at the belief.

So what I take Williams to have in mind when he claims that if I
could acquire a belief $b$ at will, I could acquire $b$ whether or not it
was true, irrespective of its truth, is that in such a case it would be
possible for me to come to acquire $b$ while having disregarded as irre­
levant the issue of $b$'s truth or falsity.

The issue immediately arises of whether he wants to claim that all
beliefs acquired at will are acquired irrespective of truth, or in­
stead only that if it is possible for me to acquire beliefs at will,
then it is possible for me to acquire them irrespective of truth (which
is all (1) strictly claims). As I've elaborated the view here, it
would be possible for someone to believe at will yet take into account
issues relevant to the belief's truth or falsity. When I choose my be­
liefs I might choose only those which seem likely to be true, while
acquiring beliefs at will nonetheless. The Cartesian model of belief­
acquisition is like this; while I will to acquire my beliefs, I never­
theless can (and should, if I am to be rational) will to believe only
those things which the understanding comprehends with sufficiently per­
flect clarity.\footnote{Descartes, Meditation 4.}

But if Williams allows that some beliefs acquired at will are not
acquired irrespective of truth, his argument is invalid. (1)-(3) will
then only establish that with regard to no belief acquired at will
independently of truth-considerations could I believe that it had been
acquired in this way. They will not establish ($4'$) as it stands, and
($4'$) is needed for the plausibility of the remainder of the argument.
So we must assume that Williams is making a stipulation about the
meaning of "belief at will," such that all acquisitions of a belief at will are acquisitions irrespective of truth.

Given this clarification, it is possible to reconstruct the reasoning which leads Williams to assume that (1) is true. It has been determined that it follows from the meaning of "belief at will" that acquiring a belief b at will is acquiring b irrespective of b's truth. Let us assume that this conceptual connection is so transparent that we could not ascribe to anyone a belief that he has the ability to acquire beliefs at will without ascribing to him the belief that he has the ability to acquire beliefs irrespective of their truth. Therefore, if I know I have the ability to believe at will, then I know I have the ability to acquire beliefs irrespective of their truth. And let us also assume that due to this same conceptual connection, if in full consciousness I will to acquire a belief, then in full consciousness I will to acquire it irrespective of its truth. Then assume the truth of (7): that if I can acquire beliefs at will then I know that I can acquire beliefs at will. It follows that if I can acquire beliefs at will, then I know that I can acquire beliefs irrespective of their truth. Then, with one further assumption—that if I could acquire a belief at will, I could will to acquire it in full consciousness—(1) follows: that if I could acquire a belief at will, I could will in full consciousness to acquire a belief irrespective of its truth.

I want to grant for the moment⁹ all of the steps to this conclusion except the last, and focus on the question of why Williams thinks that if I could believe at will I would be able to do so in full consciousness. He might hold that it is a consequence of another assumption such as: that it must be possible to perform in full consciousness anything one does at will. Or he might hold that it is a consequence of a stronger claim: that all acquisition of beliefs at will is done in full consciousness—a stipulation about the meaning of "belief at will."

The issue of which reflects Williams' intention is important because it bears on the validity of the overall argument. In premises (2) and (3), the "before" and "after the event" cases are to be understood as before and after the event of willing in full consciousness to acquire a belief irrespective of its truth. Therefore, they only establish that with regard to no belief acquired at will in full consciousness could I believe I had acquired it at will, a weaker conclusion than (4'). On this interpretation, even if (1)-(3) were true, Williams would fail to establish (4'), because these premises fail to rule out the possibility of my believing that I have acquired beliefs at will, when my belief was not acquired in full consciousness. Yet Williams

---

⁹Some doubts about the plausibility of (7) are raised below.
needs (4') for the rest of the argument. 10

For this reason, Williams needs to claim that believing at will is willing to acquire beliefs in full consciousness; only with this assumption can (4') be established by (1)-(3'), for it rules out the possibility of acquiring beliefs at will not in full consciousness. So in what follows I will take this further stipulation to be included in the meaning of "belief at will" just as I did earlier with "irrespective of truth." Therefore, (1) should be rewritten:

(1') Necessarily, if I acquire a belief at will, then I will in full consciousness to acquire it irrespective of truth,

and (2) and (3') should be revised to read:

(2') Necessarily, if in full consciousness I will to acquire a belief irrespective of its truth, then before the event it is impossible that I think of it as a belief of mine,

(3'') Necessarily, if in full consciousness I will to acquire a belief irrespective of its truth, then after the event it is impossible that I in full consciousness regard it as a belief of mine and also believe that it was acquired at will.

This elaboration of the concept has determined that acquiring a belief \( b \) at will is willing to acquire \( b \) while not taking into account any considerations relevant to the truth or falsity of \( b \), and doing this in full consciousness. We can assume that the full consciousness stipulation involves the believer's awareness that he or she has arrived at or is attempting to arrive at the belief in this way. Given these facts, Williams argues that such a believer "before the event" could not regard it as a belief purporting to represent reality, and afterwards could not regard it as a belief of his or hers while knowing how it originated.

Before the Event

Williams seems a little less sure about the "before the event" case than about the "after the event" one. He says that "it is unclear that before the event I could seriously think of it as a belief...At the very least, there must be a restriction on what is the case after the event" (my emphasis). From the temporizing remark "it is unclear," it seems that Williams in (2') is actually pursuing a thought peripheral to the main line of argument, and that his "at the very least" which prefaces (3) functions to bring us back to the line of reasoning in which he

10 A (5') weakened so as to make the rest of the argument work—if with respect to every acquisition of a belief at will in full consciousness I have performed it is necessary that I not believe it took place, then I could not know that I was able to acquire beliefs at will—would be implausible, since I might still come to know I could acquire beliefs at will by noting the times I had done it not in full consciousness.
places most confidence. In any case, (2') is not relevant to the re-
mainder of the argument. Since (4') claims that I could not know that I
had acquired a belief at will and the antecedent of (5') also refers to
a past belief-acquisition, only the "after the event" case is needed.
And if the inability "before the event" to think of a proposition as
"purporting to represent reality" is thought by itself to prevent be-
lief, then the remainder of the argument is superfluous; (2') alone
would be sufficient to establish Williams' conclusion. Because of the
irrelevance of (2') to the overall argument, then, it will be disre-
garded.

Nevertheless, it is useful to examine briefly the situation of a
prospective believer at will "before the event," in that it will illu-
minate some of the problems involved in conceiving of the phenomenon.

Presumably prospective believers at will, like the rest of us,
already have a number of beliefs; they are to try to add another belief
to their pre-existing stock. In normal belief-acquisition, adding a be-
lief usually requires changing or giving up other beliefs which are seen
to be incompatible with the new one. If I come to believe that my
schefflera has scale, then I no longer believe that it does not have
scale, and I give up my belief that scheffleras do not get scale.

This is not to say one cannot have inconsistent beliefs, but it is
implausible to hold that an agent's beliefs could be characterized by no
logic whatever. Some are better at seeing the implications of what they
believe than others, but everyone sees some implications of his or her
beliefs. The fact that we usually do not attribute such recognizably
inconsistent beliefs to a person has been held to result from the fact
that unless some such minimal degree of inconsistency is ascribed to a
belief set, we cannot attribute any beliefs to the agent. 12

The question then arises as to whether Williams thinks that in be-
lief at will the same requirements operate. If our believer succeeds in
coming to believe p at will, must he give up other beliefs he sees to be
incompatible with p? Suppose he already believes not-p? Or suppose p
is itself obviously inconsistent. On one interpretation of "irrespec-
tive of truth," no such rearrangement of beliefs is required; the new
belief is merely added to the old stock.

11 What the argument for this conclusion would be is not clear, due
partially to the obscurity of the phrase "purporting to represent
reality." Can't any consistent proposition be thought to do this, in
the sense that it describes a possible state of the world?

12 For an argument for this view, see Donald Davidson, "Psychology as
Philosophy" in S.C. Brown (ed.), The Philosophy of Psychology,
If Williams thinks such consistency requirements no longer operate in belief at will, then the impossibility of belief at will follows directly from the fact that it is impossible to ascribe to someone such radically inconsistent beliefs. The argument he gives would be unnecessary and his claim would lose much of its interest. There is no indication that Williams holds such a view; and there is a position with regard to the consistency requirement which can more plausibly be attributed to him. On this view, though a belief acquired at will is acquired independently of truth-considerations, acquiring it does require revision of obviously incompatible pre-existing beliefs. In other words, the consistency requirements held to operate in normal belief-acquisition continue to operate here. If this is Williams' view, then he is not claiming that belief at will is impossible for the reason that if I could believe p at will I could transparently (in all recognition) believe p and its negation, which is impossible. Rather, his argument is designed to establish that even though belief at will does not involve inconsistency of belief, it still is impossible. I will adopt this interpretation in what follows.

To consider what is involved in the "before the event" situation, then, it is useful to imagine attempting to acquire a belief which has very little connection with one's other beliefs, a belief, say, about which one had no previous opinion and which is perfectly possible. Suppose that I have selected as my target the proposition "The next coin tossed will come down heads." I now must come to believe this at will, in full consciousness. In trying to believe it I must remain quite indifferent to this proposition's truth or falsity, and I must therefore dismiss as irrelevant any considerations related to that issue. I may only take into account considerations relevant to the effects of actions I may take if I believe it (e.g. betting on the throw), congruence with others' beliefs (my friends believe it and will like me better if I do too), and the like.

The problem arises from the fact that my willing is to result in my acquisition of a special state--believing--which, as Williams puts it, "aims at truth." To believe p is to take p to be true, it is to view p as "representing reality," that is, as characterizing the way reality actually is. Trying to believe at will, then, is trying to take this attitude towards a proposition's truth while knowing that one has taken the issue of its truth or falsity to be irrelevant and that one has ignored all considerations related to this issue. No wonder it would at least be difficult to succeed.

After the Event

(3'), which concerns the "after the event" case, is one of the most interesting parts of the argument; exploration of the issues surrounding it reveals important facts about belief-acquisition. To examine this premise, we must imagine that, per impossibile, I have succeeded in
acquiring b at will. Now Williams argues that I cannot "after the event" both regard b as a belief of mine and also believe that I acquired it at will.

It is first necessary to clarify this claim. Taken as it is stated, it seems as if Williams is arguing that it is impossible for the following two claims both to be true:

A: I believe \( \neg b \) is a belief of mine\(^{14}\)

B: I believe \( \neg \neg (I \text{ acquired b at will}) \).

But further clarification is required.

First, it is clear from the context that by "belief of mine" in A, Williams means a particular present belief of mine, i.e. a belief I now hold (he says I regard it as "something I take to be true" [my emphasis]). Therefore, for clarify A should be rewritten:

A': I believe \( \neg b \) is a present belief of mine\(^{14}\).

The "it" in B refers to the same belief b referred to in A, the belief which was in fact acquired at will. But B does not explicitly state that I believe that b is a present belief of mine; it says just that I believe that I acquired b at will. Of course, for me to believe that it was acquired at will requires that I think it is a belief which I held at least one time (since I acquired it). But it is left open as to whether or not I think of it as a present belief.

Consider the options:

B': I believe \( \neg \neg (I \text{ acquired b at will}) \) and it is not the case that I believe \( \neg b \) is a present belief of mine\(^{14}\).

B'': I believe \( \neg \neg (I \text{ acquired b at will}) \) and I believe \( \neg \neg b \) is a present belief of mine\(^{14}\).

Now B' is inconsistent with A', in that the negation of A'--it is not the case that I believe that b is a present belief of mine--is a consequence of B'. So, it will be trivially true that A' and B' can't both be true: but this is clearly not the inconsistency Williams had in mind.

So it must be B'' which is alleged to be inconsistent with A'. However, B'' entails A', since A' is one of the conjuncts of B''. So if

---

\(^{13}\)His scare-quoted "belief", I take it, indicates that actually this is impossible.

\(^{14}\)\(\neg \neg \) indicates what is believed.
the conjunction of A' and B'' is inconsistent, then B'' by itself is inconsistent; A' is simply redundant. So B'' seems closer to capturing the inconsistency.

But clarification is still required. As formulated in this way, B'' seems possible, and Williams does not try to deny it. He does not claim to show that it is impossible that at a certain time I could believe that b is a present belief of mine and at a later time come to believe that I had acquired b at will (so long as I no longer think I believe it). So for it to be plausible that B'' is impossible, then, each conjunct must at least be assumed to have the same time index, i.e., the two beliefs must occur at the same time. A better way of capturing Williams' intention (as evinced in his phrase "I could not...regard this as a belief of mine...and also know that I acquired it at will"; my emphasis) is to hold that what is claimed to be impossible is a conjoined belief, i.e., a single belief whose content is the conjunction of the two beliefs occurring in B'':

\[
B''': I\text{ believe } \overline{b} \text{ is a present belief of mine and I acquired } b \text{ at will.}
\]

If we take Williams to be claiming that it is B''' which is impossible, then (3'') must be similarly revised:

\[
(3''') \text{ Necessarily, if in full consciousness I will to acquire a belief } b \text{ irrespective of its truth, then after the event it is impossible that I believe in full consciousness } \overline{b} \text{ is a present belief of mine and I acquired } b \text{ at will.}
\]

Williams' claim, then, is that I can't believe that b--which I believe is a present belief of mine--was acquired at will. If I do regard something as a belief of mine, then it is not the case that I think I acquired it at will. And should I come to believe that a feeling of conviction about p's truth which I had had up to that moment had originated in this manner, I would have to believe that this feeling was no longer a belief of mine. Instead, I could describe my present state as an inclination to think p was true, or a strong hunch that it was, or a feeling of being favorably disposed towards p's truth. But I could not think that I actually believed that p was true while knowing that I came to believe it disregarding the issue of its truth.

But note that this claim does not entail that I cannot think I have acquired a belief b at will; it merely establishes that if I did think so, it would have to be the case that I did not think that b was a present belief of mine. Even if B''' is necessarily false, B'' remains possible, so it is left as possible that I could think that I had acquired a past belief of mine at will, so long as it is a belief which I did not think I held any longer.
An Examination of (3'')

(3'') is a plausible claim, and I will argue that something like it is true. As a preliminary, it is useful to investigate what there might be about the realization that a particular belief had been acquired at will which might be thought to prevent me from thinking that I still believed it. Certain facts seem clear. If I knew I had acquired a belief at will, I would know that I had deliberately induced my believing, and in a way which disregarded as irrelevant issues related to the belief's truth. I would know that I had decided to take something as true on the basis of considerations which I knew did not count towards its truth or falsity. And I would also know that my belief did not originate through a means which made it in any way likely that the beliefs I acquired by it were true. Therefore, I would know that if my belief did turn out to be true, it would be simply accidental, a matter of chance, that it did. The difficulty is this: knowing these facts, how can I continue to think that I still take to be true what I came to believe in this manner.

In typical cases of belief-acquisition, we think we arrive at beliefs in ways such that what we believe is likely to be true. The normal channels through which we acquire beliefs are thought to be reliable to the extent that if I have no reason to think my belief \( b \) was not arrived at in the normal way, the mere fact that I hold \( b \) is some reason to think \( b \) is true (though of course a far from conclusive one, since it is all too easy for us to obtain false beliefs).

I assume, for example, that when my perceptual organs are operating correctly and the conditions are normal, the information they give me is veridical and I can reliably infer from it. So, I think that beliefs arrived at from perception are likely to be true. The same holds for our methods of inference, deductive and inductive; we think that in following them we at least increase our chances of arriving at truth. But in the case of belief at will I not only lack such assurance about my method of belief-acquisition, I know that the way I am arriving at my beliefs has no connection with the belief's truth.

It is this fact which causes the difficulty for belief at will. For there are serious doubts about whether someone who actually did think that his feeling of conviction about a particular proposition's truth was produced in a manner which had no connection with the belief's truth could believe of this proposition that it was something that he believed. If this situation is impossible, then an argument can be constructed to the conclusion that the case of regarding a particular \( b \) as a present belief of one's and acquired at will is also impossible.

I want to argue that something like this situation is impossible; and I see the plausibility of (3'') as arising from that of a more general claim about that impossibility, which has implications for cases of belief other than belief at will. I first try to formulate this
claim fairly carefully, and then present considerations which support it.

The Underlying Claim

A first approximation of the claim I have in mind might be that it is a necessary condition of my believing of a particular proposition that it is a belief of mine that I not think that my feeling of conviction about its truth was produced in a manner which has no connection with its truth. But there is one unproblematic way in which I could continue to think I still held a belief originally acquired in this way. I could think that though I first came to believe it in this way, I now believe it for different, truth-related reasons. A distinction must be made between the origination of a belief—the way it first came to be held—and its sustainment—why it is held now. Though I may first learn that the Willamette River runs through Portland from my elementary school geography teacher, I now have been there and observed it myself. I can tell that my belief now rests on my observations and not the teacher's lectures because I know that should I learn that the teacher was a fraud who got his job on falsified credentials, knew nothing of geography and delighted in making up the information he presented in class, my belief that the Willamette River runs through Portland would be unshaken. Only if my belief in the reliability of my observations yesterday was shown to be unjustified would I give up the belief. So what the belief now rests on is not what originally brought it into being.

Using this distinction, one might hold that I could acquire a belief at will and later take into account evidence related to its truth, so that I then believe it because of the evidence and not because of the original willing. I do not want to argue that such a situation is impossible, and it would serve as a counter-example to my claim.

So the claim must be revised. What I want to argue is impossible is that I believe of a particular proposition that I now believe it and that my belief is not sustained by any considerations related to the truth of the proposition (which I will abbreviate as "truth-considerations"). I can't think I believe it and think that the reasons why I now believe it have nothing to do with factors which in any way count towards the truth of the belief, which support its truth to some degree, however weakly. To put it carefully:

\[ C_1: \text{Necessarily, I do not believe } \exists \text{ I believe } p \text{ and my belief of } p \text{ is not sustained by any truth-considerations}. \]

But \( C_1 \) is still not entirely clear; it is ambiguous between two readings: \( \text{ de dicto } \) and \( \text{ de re } \).

\[ C_1': \text{Necessarily, } \forall \varepsilon (\exists p) \text{ (I believe } \exists \text{ I believe } p \text{ and my belief of } p \text{ is not sustained by any truth considerations)} \]

449
C_i''': Necessarily, I do not believe \((\exists p)(I \text{ believe } p \text{ and my belief of } p \text{ is not sustained by any truth-considerations})\)

C_i' is the de re reading; it says that there is no particular proposition such that I can believe of it that I believe it and that my belief is not sustained by any truth-considerations. C_i''', de dicto; it says that I cannot believe that there is any proposition such that I believe it and my belief is not sustained by any truth-considerations. C_i' is consistent with the negation of C_i'''; there may be no particular belief of mine which I can think I hold unsustained by truth-considerations, but I could still think that there is among my beliefs one held unsustained (though I do not specify which one). The situation is like that described earlier: I can believe that one of my beliefs is false, but I cannot believe of any particular belief that it is false (for I would not then believe it). On the other hand, if C_i''' is true, then so is C_i'. If I cannot believe that any of my beliefs are held unsustained, then I cannot believe of this particular one that it is held unsustained.

The claim for which I want to argue is C_i', the de re reading (which is also the sense Williams seems to have in mind in (3'i''')). If C_i' were true, then there would be implications not only for the case of belief at will but also for any kind of belief-acquisition which does not take into account truth-considerations. For example, if I were to wake up in the morning feeling convinced that the seeds I planted had come up, and then find out that I only thought this because I had dreamed they had, it would imply that I would have to no longer think I believed they had.

Having clarified C_i, it is possible to investigate more carefully why C_i' might be thought to be true. One might hold that the reason I can't believe myself to be in the situation of holding the belief \(b\) and believing that my belief is not sustained by truth-considerations is that the situation I would be believing myself to be in is itself contradictory. One might hold

\[ C_2: \text{ Necessarily, } \neg (\exists x)(\exists p)(x \text{ believes } p \text{ and } x's \text{ belief of } p \text{ is not sustained by truth-considerations}). \]

And one might argue for C_i' by claiming that because this situation is so obviously inconsistent, necessarily no one could regard himself as being in it.\(^{15}\)

I do not take this approach, because C_2 is implausible; it has the consequence that some forms of belief which, though irrational, seem to occur are declared to be impossible. It says that one cannot hold a

---

\(^{15}\) This claim would have to be clarified and strengthened, since it is possible for us to believe impossible things. Some mathematicians believe that Goldbach's conjecture is true, others that it is false. One of these views is a belief in a necessary falsehood, but that does not prevent belief.
belief as a result of non-truth-related factors, even if one is unaware of why one holds it. So, according to C\textsubscript{2} it is impossible to believe something only because of psychological causes, for example, it is not possible for me to hold the belief that people will stab me in the back if they can, only because my mother did not hold me enough as a baby.

C\textsubscript{2} also denies the possibility of a case in which I think I have used evidence in arriving at my belief but these considerations are not in fact the real reasons I hold the belief. I am simply not very good at discerning why I believe and feel what I do, and my belief has actually arisen as a result of factors which have nothing to do with the truth of the belief.

Williams himself seems to believe that C\textsubscript{2} is true. In a separate argument in the paper he claims that it is a necessary condition of belief that there be a "regular connexion between the environment, the perceptions and what the man came out with" (149), and he uses this fact to arrive directly at the result that we cannot believe at will. But he does not use this claim in the argument under consideration, and one can argue for without being committed to C\textsubscript{2}, since C\textsubscript{1} claims only that it is a necessary condition of one believing that one has a belief that one doesn't believe such a connection is lacking.

If C\textsubscript{2} is false, C\textsubscript{1} understood in the de dicto reading (C\textsubscript{1}"") is implausible. If it is in fact possible to have a belief which is not sustained by truth-considerations, then I might come to recognize this fact. Knowing that it is possible, I might then come to believe that it is true of myself. Thus, I might come to believe that there is a b (I don't know which one) which is a belief of mine and is not sustained by truth-considerations.

Also, if C\textsubscript{2} is false it is possible that I could believe of someone else, say, Joan, that she has the belief b and b is not sustained by truth-considerations. Why, then, can't I believe it of myself? To examine the intuition behind C\textsubscript{1}, it is necessary to consider an example of a belief ostensibly not sustained by truth-considerations. I want to examine one such case in some detail, and then argue that the factors which operate in it would operate in any case which shared the relevant feature of involving someone maintaining a belief when that person thinks the belief is not sustained by truth-considerations.

Imagine a situation where a subject under hypnosis is caused to have a certain belief by the hypnotist and is later told by her that he believes it only because of her hypnotic suggestion. Can the subject still think he believes it, knowing now that his feeling of conviction resulted only from the hypnotist's machinations, and that there is therefore no reason to think the belief is true?

The hypnotist might have induced a belief for which the subject already has ample evidence, in which case the subject will be able to continue to hold the belief by bolstering it through these evidential
considerations. Or he might believe, for example, that from what he
knows of the hypnotist's character, she would only have induced true
beliefs, so he does have indirect evidence of the belief's truth. In
these cases, his belief would have originated without utilization of
considerations relevant to the belief's truth, but he is able to continue
to hold it by making use of such considerations, only because his belief
is sustained in a different way from the way in which it was produced.

But suppose the subject is unable to develop such support for the
belief, so that he must continue to believe without being in possession
of considerations relevant to the belief's truth: this is the relevant
case. Suppose that the hypnotist induces a belief that the subject has
the ability to be a brilliant opera singer. And suppose that the subject
not only has no evidence for the belief; he has other conflicting beliefs,
e.g. that he has never been able to carry a tune, is tone-deaf, has
never succeeded in being admitted into even the most amateur choir, and
in fact seems to cause pain to those within earshot when he merely tries
to hum a tune. Yet since hypnosis he has found himself convinced that
despite these facts, he has this ability. Now, upon learning why he has
this feeling of conviction, will he continue to think he believes he has
the ability? Perhaps despite his knowledge of its origin some feeling of
conviction that he has the ability will persist. But now understanding
why, he cannot continue to credit this feeling with the status of a belief.
He can no longer think he believes it is really true that he has this
ability; he can only describe the feeling as a strong hunch or feeling or
suspicion, if indeed it persists at all.

Even in a case where the subject has no such obvious contrary evidence
(as in the example of believing that the next coin tossed will come up
heads), the same phenomenon would occur. Knowing why he has the feeling
forces him to reclassify it as not a genuine belief. He cannot really think
he thinks it is true while knowing that he was only caused to have the
feeling by the hypnotist.

The conclusion suggested by this example will not apply only to the
case of beliefs induced by hypnosis. It will hold in any case wherein
one is supposed to regard \( B \) as a belief of one's while believing that \( b \)
is not sustained by truth-considerations, because the factors which make
such a situation impossible in the hypnosis example will be present in any
such case.

Consider, for example, a case of continuing to believe \( b \) while knowing
that one believes \( b \) solely because of a desire that \( b \) be true, and
therefore knowing that one has utilized no considerations which tend to
show \( b \) to be true. Suppose I believe that my mother loves me, and one day
I come to realize that this belief of mine is not based on or sustained
by any evidence or data counting towards its truth. It's not that I
interpret the data as showing that she loves me, or assume she does
because I think all mothers do, for that would be taking into account
truth-considerations. Rather, I realize that nothing relevant to showing
that my belief is true is involved in the maintenance of my belief; in
fact, I discover I believe it simply because I want so much for it to be
true and cannot even bear the thought that it is false. The case is
difficult to conceive because in cases where emotional commitments are involved in the sustainment of the belief, evidential considerations are usually still used, even if manipulated and selected to support the desired view. But if I really found myself in that situation, I would either have to try to come up with relevant truth-considerations to bolster my belief (and think that I had succeeded in finding some) or if that were not possible and I still did not think I believed it because of any reasons which counted towards its truth, I would have to regard myself as not any longer believing that it was true. I might find myself acting in ways which would normally lead me to conclude that I still held the belief, but these kinds of data can be accounted for in ways which do not require me to assume that I believe p. Other states can cause such symptoms, for example a hunch, a guess, wishful thinking, or a superstitious feeling which does not amount to belief. When I become aware of why I have this feeling, I cannot ascribe to it the status of belief. I cannot think that I now believe p while thinking that this feeling is based on no considerations relevant to showing the truth of p, no matter what I find myself doing or saying.

The issue has so far been described as concerning the conditions which must be fulfilled in order for one to attribute a belief to oneself. But this result does not have application only to the case of ascribing beliefs to oneself. In examining the issue further, it can be determined that in addition to C\(_1\)' there is a further truth about belief-ascription:

\[ C_3: \text{Necessarily, } \forall(x) (\exists p) (I \text{ believe that } x \text{ believes } \neg x \text{ believes } p \text{ and } x \text{'s belief of } p \text{ is not sustained by truth-considerations}). \]

I can't believe this of x because to do so I would have to take x as ascribing to himself a situation which it is impossible for me to ascribe to myself (even if the situation itself is not impossible). And what prevents me from ascribing it to myself is not my possession of some property which is peculiar to me. x can't believe \( \neg x \text{ believes } p \) and x's belief of p is not sustained by truth-considerations because no one can believe this about himself. So I cannot believe that someone is in this impossible situation; while I can believe some impossible things in cases where I don't recognize the inconsistency, this is not such a case. The connection is transparent and explicit here.

The truth of C\(_1\)' and of C\(_3\) thus can be seen to result from the truth of a more general claim:

\[ C_4: \text{Necessarily, } \forall(x) (\exists p) (x \text{ believes } \neg x \text{ believes } p \text{ and } x \text{'s belief of } p \text{ is not sustained by any truth-considerations}). \]

In order to elaborate further considerations which support this claim it is important to distinguish C\(_4\) from another claim with which it can easily be confused:

\[ C_5: \text{Necessarily, } \forall(x) (\exists p) (x \text{ believes } p \text{ and } x \text{ believes that } x \text{'s belief of } p \text{ is not sustained by any truth-considerations}). \]

C\(_5\) differs from C\(_4\) by the addition of a further condition. C\(_5\)'s conjunct
"x believes that x's belief of p is not sustained by any truth-considerations" implies that x believes that x believes p; therefore C₅ is no different from C₄ except in adding the condition "x believes p". C₅ claims that awareness that one's belief p is not sustained by truth-considerations is incompatible with having the belief, while C₄ claims that such an awareness is itself impossible. Therefore, C₅ follows from C₄, because if it is impossible to believe that one has a belief not sustained by truth-considerations, then it is impossible to do that and have the belief. On C₅, if I were to come to believe of what I took to be a belief of mine that it was not based on evidence, it would be the case that I no longer held the belief. On C₄ I might hold the belief b even though I couldn't believe of it that it was sustained in this way. So if I came to think my feeling of conviction for p was not sustained by truth-considerations, I wouldn't think I believed p, but I might believe p nonetheless. I might continue to believe irrationally but I couldn't believe that I was.

Stuart Hampshire argues for a conclusion like C₅ in his paper "Freedom of Mind." He considers an example like the case of the hypnotist and claims, "if [the hypnotist's victim] had known, while under the influence of the hypnotist, that his beliefs were adequately explained by the hypnotist's suggestions, as sufficient conditions in themselves, and that these suggestions were not sufficient evidence of truth, then his beliefs would have been only inclinations to believe." Where Hampshire talks of "sufficient evidence of truth" C₅ substitutes the weaker "any truth-considerations."

C₅ is a plausible claim, and considerations like those advanced in favor of C₄ might be used to support it. However, Williams does not argue for it, nor would establishing it help him in this argument. Even if C₅ is true, we cannot conclude that C₄ is true, and C₄ is what Williams needs in the argument. Suppose C₄ is false, and it is possible to believe that one has a belief b which is not sustained by truth-considerations. C₅ would still be true if it were true that necessarily when one believed b was not sustained by truth-considerations, one didn't believe b.

An argument for C₄ was already supplied in the examination of C₁, for the first-person examples did not rest on peculiarities of the particular believer. Further supporting considerations emerge through investigation of examples of third-person ascription of belief. Consider a case which specifically involves belief at will. Imagine a subject in a psychology experiment who is asked to believe at will a number of propositions (perhaps ones are selected which he does not already believe and for which he has no evidence, e.g., there is copper on Uranus). What behavior of the subject could be taken to show that he believes he has succeeded in his task? Certainly his fervent assertion that he believes the propositions won't be decisive; there would have to be opportunities

---

provided in the experiment for him to give more persuasive indications.

Suppose the experimenters ask him to check either the 'True' or the 'False' boxes on a piece of paper where the propositions are written, and tell him that if he gets the answer wrong, he and everyone he cares about will be killed. If the subject does check the 'True' boxes, there will be some of the strongest imaginable evidence that he in fact believes the propositions. But even this evidence is insufficient to establish that the subject believes he has used no considerations supporting the propositions' truth in arriving at the beliefs. We do not even have good evidence that he has not in fact taken into account such considerations; at best all we are entitled to assume is that the subject previously had no opinion about or evidence for the propositions' truth, and that no such evidence appeared to exist in the experimentation room. But it is still possible both that the subject believes he has used what he takes to be evidence in arriving at the beliefs, and that he actually has used it. For example, he might think that the experimenters would not be so malicious as to encourage him to believe things which were false, and therefore he would have evidence of their truth. Or he might just think he has such evidence: he might come to regard, e.g. the placement of a certain chair in the room as evidence (even though it does not actually support the proposition in question, he thinks it does). Or he might believe that he did use evidence, even though he cannot now remember what it was.

The point is that nothing the subject did or said would provide adequate evidence to show that he believed that a particular present belief of his was acquired at will (and sustained for no other reason). And we would be forced to accept one of these alternate interpretations of the phenomena as correct to avoid ascribing to the subject an incomprehensible position. If he were to assert that he had been successful in his project, he would be saying, "I have disregarded any considerations which might tend to show that \( p \) is true or false. Yet I believe \( p \) is true." While he need not be committed to a straightforward contradiction like: "I have no opinion about \( p \)'s truth but I believe \( p \)," it would be possible for him to assert, "I think the evidence against the truth of \( p \) is conclusive, but I nevertheless believe that \( p \) is true." Though people sometimes say things like this, we interpret their assertion to mean that while what others or the world would take as evidence counts against \( p \)'s truth, they nevertheless (on the basis of factors they alone take to be telling) think \( p \) is true.

Even if he knows of no contradictory evidence, he is at least committed to saying that for all he knows, the evidence may be conclusive against \( p \), since he claims to have not taken into account evidential considerations in arriving at \( p \). And he also must hold that even if he had conclusive evidence against \( p \), he still would believe \( p \). And here again we would find the position incoherent.

Thus, \( C_4 \) is strongly supported by the impossibility of third-person
attribution to a subject of the regarding of a present particular belief of his as having been acquired and sustained independently of truth-considerations. We cannot accept this account of the situation. If we accept that the subject thinks he is not considering whether or not \( p \) is true and really thinks he has disregarded any considerations he takes to be relevant to this issue, then we cannot ascribe to him a belief that he believes \( p \) is true. Conversely, if we think he does believe \( p \), then we cannot think he believes he has disregarded the evidential considerations. So no matter what reward is offered for success in such a psychology experiment, subjects are well-advised not to volunteer; they can't win.

Apparent Counterexamples to the Claim

Having distinguished \( C_4 \) from some similar claims, it is useful to consider some situations which might appear to be counterexamples to it and determine how the view would handle them. Examination of these cases helps further clarify and support the claim. These are situations in which people might claim to believe something on the basis of no considerations relevant to the truth of what they believe, and it is at first sight not implausible to think that they do believe that they are in this situation. Two especially strong examples are cases of psychic and religious belief.

Psychics sometimes claim that they know things directly without being in possession of anything which shows them to be true. Consider a specific case. Suppose it is true (as a docudrama has it) that before the sinking of the Titanic, several people called the steamship company to say they had a premonition that it was going to sink. Now can this premonition be correctly described as a belief which the psychics think they hold not on the basis of considerations which tend to show that it is true?

For many such cases, the premonition in question would not be described as amounting to a belief by the psychic. Rather, it would be characterized as a feeling of apprehension or dread, a worry, or a hunch; the psychic did not think she actually believed the Titanic would sink. This is what usually goes on, for example, in cases of gambling where one suddenly feels that the dice will come up seven; one would hesitate to characterize such a feeling as a belief.

But suppose that the psychic says she is absolutely convinced it will sink. Then we cannot take her to think that nothing shows it to be true. In order for her position to be intelligible, we must assume that she has had some sort of "psychic experience" which led her to the belief—for example, a vision of a ship sinking with the name "Titanic" across its bow, and that she thinks that the Titanic will sink because she thinks that her having had this experience shows that the proposition is true (or is likely to be true). She might think her evidence is bad, or wouldn't be regarded as evidence by most people, but she thinks there is some evidence. If she genuinely regards herself as believing that the
Titanic will sink, then she doesn't think there is no reason to think it will.

The case of religious belief can be explained in a similar vein. It has been claimed by some philosophers and theologians that it is possible to believe and regard oneself as believing that God exists, as a leap of faith on the basis of no evidence—and in fact that such belief is the desirable form of religious belief. For an example of such belief we cannot turn to cases in which belief is based on the Bible, on the testimony of holy men, on mystical visions or on the fact that the existence of God provides the best explanation of events in this world. Such cases are ones in which the basis of the belief is taken to count towards its truth. Eliminating such cases, it is impossible to conceive of someone who takes himself to believe that God exists and also genuinely thinks that there is no reason to think this, that he knows of nothing which tends to show that the proposition is true.

The Possibility of Conscious Irrationality

Even though C_4 can handle such apparent counterexamples, there is an objection to it which is potentially more damaging. It might be argued that the claim rests on a too-simplistic picture of belief-acquisition and rules out some obviously possible forms of human irrationality.

The phenomena involved in belief-acquisition are often subtle and difficult to characterize. We know, after Freud, that a picture of humans as creatures who believe whatever their overall evidence supports is false. Other, non-evidential factors also play a role in belief-acquisition. For example, we are not emotionally neutral towards all the things we believe; we sometimes have much at stake in their being true and will try to maintain them at all costs. We try to explain away conflicting data in order to cling to such emotionally entrenched beliefs: e.g., I may ascribe bias to my examiners rather than accept a bad test score as evidence against my intellectual abilities. I can believe things because certain needs and desires I have are satisfied in doing so.

Because it is true that we believe some things primarily because of such non-evidential factors, one might argue that we can hold beliefs which we think aren't justified by our overall evidence. And it is not implausible that we could be led to think this about a particular belief and yet realize that we continue to hold it. A man may come to see that his belief that his wife is unfaithful is not supported by the evidence and realize that he really holds the belief because of general attitudes about women developed as a result of childhood experiences involving his mother. But his belief that his wife is unfaithful need not then immediately evaporate; he may continue to hold it and realize from his behavior that he hasn't shaken it.17

17 Similar issues can be raised with respect to Hume's claim (in his study) that he has no reason to believe any of the things he does about the unobserved but that he continues to hold the beliefs nonetheless.
The possibility of being aware of continuing to believe something which one thinks is not adequately supported by one's overall evidence raises difficulties for $C_4$. If this is possible, why shouldn't it be possible to be aware of continuing to believe something which one knows was arrived at independently of all truth-considerations? The difference seems to be just one of how much evidence one thinks one has. In the former case, while one thinks one has used some evidence, one thinks it is inadequate; in the latter one thinks one has used no evidence; in both cases one thinks one's belief is not justified by the overall evidential considerations. It would seem that if we can ascribe continued belief in one case, we ought to be able to in the other also.

However, such phenomena are notoriously subtle, due both to their elusiveness and also to the problem of distinguishing descriptions of the data from theoretical explanations of them (if there is such a distinction). In any case, the phenomena need not be accepted exactly as described; a more plausible explanation of what occurs in these cases is available which does not threaten $C_4$.

One needs to question whether the man really has a conjoined belief that his wife is unfaithful and that it is unreasonable to think his wife is unfaithful. Does he believe these things together, at the same time? A better interpretation is that he wavers; in the analyst's office, he thinks the belief is unreasonable, and for the moment no longer thinks she is unfaithful; after he leaves and finds that his wife hasn't yet returned home, he again thinks she is having an affair and no longer finds this belief unreasonable. Writers on self-deception sometimes have been led to make the same distinction in terms of believing at different "levels": at one level the man thinks she is unfaithful but at another ("in his heart") he knows it is unreasonable to think this. These kinds of explanations redescribe the data in ways not inconsistent with the force of $C_4$. One can still contend that even in such cases the awareness that one has a belief and the awareness that that belief is irrational do not occur conjoined as $C_4$ requires. To clarify the issue still further, we should add to $C_4$ the requirement Williams embodies in (3): this believing must be done in full consciousness, so beliefs occurring at different levels are not relevant. We then arrive at $C_6$:

\[ C_6: \text{Necessarily, } \forall (\exists x) (\exists p) (x \text{ believes in full consciousness } \exists x \text{ believes } p \text{ and } x's \text{ belief of } p \text{ is not sustained by truth-considerations}). \]

There is still controversy about what the proper analysis is of the phenomena surrounding self-deception, and I do not propose to settle that here. It is only necessary to point out that it is possible to describe these phenomena of human irrationality in ways which are compatible with the truth of $C_6$, and the examination shows that $C_6$ is a very plausible claim resulting from facts about belief-ascription.

Given $C_6$, Williams can arrive at his desired conclusion by utilizing a variant of the assumption he needed earlier in connection with (1). Let
us describe a belief originally acquired at will and still believed only for that reason as one which is "sustained at will." Then, using the results of the earlier analyses, it is true that having a belief which is sustained at will entails having a belief which is not sustained by truth-considerations. And one can conclude, for the reasons given in the earlier section concerning the transparency of this logical connection, that if I believe my belief is sustained at will, then I believe my belief is not sustained by truth-considerations. Hence $P_1$:

$$P_1: \text{Necessarily, } (\exists x) (p) \ (\text{if } x \text{ believes in full consciousness } \neg x \text{ believes } p \text{ and } x \text{'s belief of } p \text{ is sustained at will}, \text{ then } x \text{ believes in full consciousness } \neg x \text{ believes } p \text{ and } x \text{'s belief of } p \text{ is not sustained by any truth-considerations}).$$

Given $P_1$ and $C_6$, Williams can now conclude:

$$P_2: \text{Necessarily, } \neg (\exists x) (\exists p) (\text{x believes in full consciousness } \neg x \text{ believes } p \text{ and } x \text{'s belief of } p \text{ is sustained at will}).$$

Adding an antecedent and using an instance of $P_2$, Williams can arrive at a final version of $(3)$:

$$(3'')' \text{ Necessarily, if in full consciousness I will to acquire a belief } b \text{ irrespective of its truth, then after the event it is impossible that I believe of } b \text{ in full consciousness } \neg \text{I believe } b \text{ and } b \text{ is sustained at will}.$$ 

This version clarifies the de dicto-de re ambiguity of earlier formulations and also modifies them by replacing the claim that I can't believe that I acquired $b$ at will with the claim that I can't believe $b$ is sustained at will. This modification is necessary because an examination of the underlying argument showed that only the weaker claim could (and was intended to) be supported; there was found to be no difficulty in believing that a present belief had been acquired at will so long as one no longer believed that it was sustained on the basis of no truth-considerations.

With $(3'')'$, then, we have arrived at a principle which both captures the intuition I take to underlie Williams' claims and is plausible. I have argued that it derives its persuasiveness from a more general truth: that one cannot hold that something is a particular belief of one's which is not sustained by truth-considerations.

It is now possible to return to the remainder of the argument to determine whether even given the truth of $(3'')'$, Williams can establish his conclusion that it is impossible to acquire beliefs at will.

The Remainder of the Argument

$(3'')'$ is weaker than the earlier formulations; after having been modified to be clear and plausible it is in fact too weak to support $4'$.  

459
(4') claims that I cannot believe of a belief that I have acquired it at will; (4') did not follow even from (3'''). (3'''') leaves it as possible that there are beliefs which I could believe were acquired at will; I merely can't believe it of present ones. And (3'''') leaves still a further option. It allows it as possible that I even believe that b is a present belief which I had acquired at will, so long as I now do not believe it is sustained in the same way.

If (3''''') allows it to be possible that I believe I have acquired beliefs at will, then the remainder of the argument does not go through. Without (4'), (6) no longer follows from (5'): the possibility remains open that I could come to know that I can acquire beliefs at will, for I can be aware of past instances of exercising the ability. And since I can believe I have the ability, it is left as possible that I could have it.

The examination of the argument thus shows that when (3) is weakened in accordance with Williams' intentions and to make it as plausible as possible, the argument becomes invalid and fails to establish the conclusion that we cannot believe at will.

It is nevertheless useful to examine the second stage of the argument [(5')-(7)]. Further facts are revealed about Williams' concept of belief at will, and it can be shown that even if the first stage had been successful and (4') had been established, the second stage would not go through.

(5') claims that I cannot know that I have the ability to believe at will if, even if I ever had acquired beliefs at will, it is necessarily false that I believe I have done so. The assumption is that I cannot know I can do things of sort s if with respect to every instance of sort s it is a condition of my doing it that I not know that I do it.

Why does Williams think this is true? It can't be that he takes it to follow from a more general principle that one can only learn one has an ability from observation of having exercised it. Such a principle is false: I can become aware of capacities I have through other means. For example, I could extrapolate from other data I have about myself: my knowledge of my ability to run a mile in a certain time plus knowledge of my general swimming competence may make it possible for me to know that I have the ability to swim a lap in a certain time, though I have never done a timed swim. Or I could learn of an ability through the reliable testimony of others: my music teacher may tell me that I have the ability to become an excellent pianist, though at present I haven't advanced past basic finger exercises.

Williams must be relying on the distinctive fact about believing at will that it is an ability such that I necessarily can't know I've exercised it with respect to a particular belief. The antecedent of (5') should be interpreted to mean:
R: With respect to every acquisition a of a belief at will I have performed, it is necessarily not the case that I believe of a that a occurred.

It follows that if I think I do believe b, then even if b in fact resulted from a I don't believe that b arose from a.

Now R does not establish that I necessarily can't believe that I have acquired beliefs at will, or even that I necessarily can't believe that there is among my present beliefs a belief which I acquired at will. It just says that I can't believe of a particular instance of such an acquisition that it is such an instance. But if these other possibilities remain open, it is possible for me to come to know I have the ability to believe at will. It is even left as possible that I could believe I have exercised it.

In this regard, consider another example of something which if I do it then I can't believe of a particular case that I have done it. If I have forgotten forever that my mother's maiden name is Holter, then it is a necessary truth that I do not believe that I have forgotten forever that my mother's maiden name is Holter. I can't be aware that I have forgotten forever that my mother's maiden name is Holter. Nevertheless, it is still possible for me to know that I have the capacity to forget forever that my mother's maiden name is Holter. I can certainly know that I have the capacity to forget things forever; perhaps I know that every human has this ability to forget things forever (from observing cases of other people who exercised it), and hence know that I, being human, have it as well. Being aware that I have the ability, I can even believe that I have probably exercised it (though not of course being aware of in what case it was exercised). And I can know that I could exercise this ability with respect to the fact that my mother's maiden name is Holter.

Similarly, in the belief at will case I could know that it is possible for me to do it (perhaps I have seen others do it), and even that I have done it (perhaps others tell me I do it all the time), even though I cannot be aware that a particular case is an instance of having done it. So (5') seems false and therefore (6) is not established—that I cannot know I am able to acquire beliefs at will.

(7) is also a controversial premise. What is it about believing at will that leads Williams to think that if we had this ability, we would know we had it? This claim requires justification, especially in the light of the fact that it is certainly not true of every ability we have that we know we have it; we can discover that we have abilities we were never aware of having.

---

18This example was suggested to me by Ronald Scales; it is useful for present purposes, even though it is not directly analogous since forgetting is not a basic action.
Williams clearly thinks there is something special about the ability to acquire beliefs at will which requires that the possessor be aware of its possession. It is a basic action and, Williams says, it is one we will perform in full consciousness. The earlier examination of the "in full consciousness" requirement suggested that it should be understood as stipulating that the believer is aware that he is trying to induce his belief independently of any truth-considerations. So in acquiring a belief at will one would be aware of what one was doing.

But even if acquiring beliefs at will is the kind of ability such that in exercising it one is aware of exercising it, it does not follow that if I can acquire beliefs at will I am aware of this ability. We have already seen that one may be unaware of an ability one has to perform an action; it can be shown that this is also possible in the case of basic actions done in full consciousness.

Take the case of the ability to lower one's rate of heartbeat. Suppose that this can be done directly, basically (we are not here concerned with methods involving thinking of calm spring days, etc.). And suppose I can do it in full consciousness, if I have the ability. Despite these facts, one could easily be unaware of the fact that one possesses this ability, as we in the Western world were until recently.

Thus, the possession of an ability to perform a basic action in full consciousness does not entail awareness of that possession. And it is not clear what other facts could be used to establish that if I can acquire beliefs at will, I must know that I can.19

The second stage as it stands, then, fails to establish the conclusion that we cannot acquire beliefs at will. However, a more plausible second stage might be developed, modifying (7) slightly. Since acquiring beliefs at will is always done in full consciousness, one might hold that if x did acquire a belief at will, there would be an actual time at which x was aware both that x believed p and that x's belief of p was sustained at will (which contradicts (3))). But in fact all the "in full consciousness" stipulation requires is that before the event one be aware of what one is doing, namely, that one is trying to believe something at will. It is not required that at the time when one first succeeds in believing it, one still has this awareness; afterwards I might think that I had not succeeded in acquiring but instead had just happened to come to believe it. This case is analogous to that of someone, hooked up to a machine in an experiment, who is trying to lower his rate of heartbeat and then succeeds in lowering it, but thinks the lowering was brought about by the machine instead of by his own efforts. Or, I might be struck by amnesia at the moment of acquisition and simply find myself with a belief, acquired I know not how.

19 Since (7) is also used to support (1), the criticisms raised here also affect that claim.
However, one could pursue this line with further modifications and hold instead that if it is possible to acquire beliefs at will, then it must be possible for there to be a time at which I am aware in a particular case that my present belief $b$ is a successful instance of such belief-acquisition. One might hold some principle of reflective consciousness such that with regard to things I do in full consciousness it must be possible for me to see that I have done them without this observation changing the state it observes. But in the case of belief at will I can never be in the position of believing that my present belief was acquired at will. However, this principle of reflective consciousness is by no means self-evident, nor is it clear how one would argue to support it.

**Conclusions**

The results of the investigation can now be summarized. Even if Williams' argument had been entirely successful, it would still have shown not that it is impossible to acquire beliefs in the way we perform basic actions, but only that acquiring beliefs basically in full consciousness and independently of truth-considerations is impossible. So he would not have shown, as he hoped to indicate, that it is a necessary truth that "belief does not respond to the will", because he would not have ruled out the possibility of a view like Descartes' in which one wills to believe but does utilize evidential considerations. Nor would he have established that acquiring beliefs is a "passive phenomenon, something that just happens to us." Even if he had shown that belief-acquisition was not a basic action, he would not have ruled out the possibility of it being a non-basic one.

But in fact the argument fails to establish even that belief-acquisition basically in full consciousness and independently of truth-considerations is impossible. At best it shows that I cannot believe of a particular belief $b$ that $b$ is a present belief of mine and is sustained at will. This fact does not imply that I cannot believe that I have acquired beliefs at will. I could believe I have done it and even that I still hold beliefs acquired that way, but I don't know which beliefs those are. Or I could believe of a particular belief that it had been acquired that way so long as either I do not think I still believe it, or (if I do think it is a present belief of mine) I do not think it is now sustained at will.

Nor does this result show that I cannot regard $b$, which in fact is a present belief which was acquired at will, as a present belief of mine. It is the awareness of why one believes $b$ which raises difficulties for thinking of $b$ as a belief, and even if I acquired $b$ at will in full consciousness and I now am aware that I believe $b$, such awareness of how I had come to believe $b$ could fail to result, as described earlier.

Nor does the result establish that if I come to suspect that I have a belief $b$ which is sustained at will, then I no longer believe $b$. It only establishes that in such a case I can no longer regard $b$ as a present
belief of mine; it is left open that I could nonetheless continue to hold b.

The result, then, is far more limited than what Williams wanted. Nevertheless, it itself is a valuable insight about the nature of belief-ascription, and it has been shown to be an instance of a more general truth which has important implications for other forms of belief. It establishes that though many kinds of irrational belief-acquisition are possible for us, at least we can't be so irrational as to think we believe something while thinking that the reason why we believe it has no connection with the truth of what we believe.

Barbara Winters
University of California, San Diego
La Jolla, California