

Beliefs: The Will Besieged by the Evidence*

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“A wise man proportions his belief
to the evidence.”

DAVID HUME [SB 110]

RESUMEN

En este artículo trato de examinar la naturaleza de la creencia, así como sus relaciones ontoepistémicas con algunos otros conceptos como el de conocimiento y verdad. Las nociones tradicionales suelen plantear problemas que requieren una consideración cuidadosa de algunos rasgos relacionados con la naturaleza de la creencia. Las creencias nunca ocurren por separado, sino que se organizan en forma de red o de maraña. Por ello, la inducción de creencias requeriría la modificación de una gran parte de la estructura en la que se pretende insertar. Considero —al igual que Hume— que una creencia es algo que *nos sucede* y sobre lo que no tenemos control en absoluto. A diferencia de Hume, no veo este rasgo como algo contingente y psicológico, sino necesario y conceptual. Trataré de argumentar que las creencias apuntan a la verdad, incluyen la aserción de que *p* es el caso y, por tanto, la voluntad ni desempeña ni puede desempeñar ningún papel en su formación. La autoinducción voluntaria de creencias de forma indirecta o “dando un rodeo” presenta problemas particulares, como la suposición de entidades mentales exóticas y otras explicaciones *ad hoc* retorcidas, la pérdida de apoyo en casos reales y causa, además, persistentes acusaciones de homuncularidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *creencia, evidencia, voluntad, Clifford, Peirce, James, Russell, Williams.*

ABSTRACT

In this paper I try to examine the nature of belief, as well as its ontoepistemic relationships with other concepts such as that of knowledge and truth. Traditional conceptions usually pose problems that require careful consideration of some of the characteristics related to the very nature of beliefs. Beliefs never occur separately but they are arranged in the form of networks or tangles. Induction of beliefs would require the alteration of a large part of the structure wherein they are meant to be inserted. I consider — as Hume did — that a belief is something that *happens to us* and over which we have no control at all. Unlike Hume, I do not view this feature as contingent and psychological, but necessary and conceptual. I shall try to argue that beliefs aim at truth, include the assertion that *p* is the case and, therefore, the will neither plays nor could play any role in their formation. The voluntary self-induction of a be-

belief in an indirect manner or ‘*taking a detour*’ presents particular problems, such as mental exotica and other *ad hoc* twisted explanations, the loss of ground on real cases and what is more, causes persistent allegations of homuncularity.

KEYWORDS: *Belief, Evidence, Will, Clifford, Peirce, James, Russell, Williams.*

One of the most controversial issues that has arisen throughout philosophical tradition from Plato to the present day, the subject of many discussions and attempts to conceptualize and classify it, has been the nature of belief, as well as its ontoepistemic relationship with other concepts such as that of knowledge and truth.

I do not intend here to give either a detailed historical study of the concept with its various avatars — which would be a really titanic task — or even a brief overview. Rather, I shall start from the notion of belief offered by the founders of pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce and William James.

As is well known, Peirce affirms that beliefs are the response to the irritation caused by a doubt. When a doubt arises, thought congruently relates our sensations within a system; “various systems of relationship of succession subsist together between the same sensations. These different systems are distinguished by having different motives, ideas, or functions. Thought is only one such system, for its sole motive, idea, and function is to produce belief, and whatever does not concern that purpose belongs to some other system of relations” [Peirce (1878), pp. 263-64]. The way we relate sensations presupposes a *habit*, namely the application of a kind of inference that has been shown to be effective in our efforts to move from the truth of assumptions to the truth of a conclusion. The belief appeases the doubt producing a habit,¹ which consists in a rule for action,² i.e. a rule that guides our behaviour in the situation that had produced the doubt. Thus the belief is the point where thought stops; but since the action and the application of any rule involve new doubts and these in turn require a resolution again, the habit established by the belief is the starting-place of another chain of thought, a new system of relationship that will lead to another belief.

It is important to note that according to Peirce if a belief does not have — in that moment or in the future — practical consequences then it is not a belief at all. What is more, if two beliefs produce the same habit to appease the doubt, they are in fact one and the same belief, and their mere phenomenological differences are not relevant. This thesis depends on his conception of meaning:

Our idea of anything *is* our idea of its sensible effects; and if we fancy that we have any other we deceive ourselves, and mistake a mere sensation accompanying the thought for a part of the thought itself. It is absurd to say that thought has any meaning unrelated to its only function. [...] It appears, then, that the

rule for attaining the third grade of clearness of apprehension is as follows: Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object [Peirce (1878), p. 266].

The question that arises almost immediately is the following: what if we find no answer that appeases the irritation of the doubt, if it does not calm us or if it even produces a greater unease? Is it possible to believe at will? And if this were possible, how would we do it? The answer to these questions presupposes a previous discussion about another issue concerning the nature of beliefs: Could we form our beliefs on the sidelines of external criteria such as empirical data or evidence? And again, if this were possible, should we do it?

Peirce attempts to answer this question in his article 'The Fixation of Belief', where he maintains that we could appease the doubt by fixing a belief in four ways. The first is the *method of tenacity*, the second is the *method of authority*, the third is the *a priori method*, and the last, the *scientific method*. Each of them has its advantages. According to Peirce, by the method of tenacity, some men readily acquire the desired belief and hold their beliefs to the end, whatever happens, attitude that produces "brilliant, but unlasting success"; the method of authority has governed mankind for centuries being the path for peace, and the *a priori* method gives comfortable conclusions [Peirce (1877), p. 255-56]. Nevertheless,

A man should consider well of them; and then, he should consider that, after all, he wishes his opinions to coincide with the fact, and that there is no reason why the results of those three first methods should do so [Peirce (1877), p. 256].

For this reason, the best method to fix our beliefs is that in which empirical data affect, or might affect, every man. Such is the method of science [Peirce (1877), pp. 253-54].

I. EVIDENTIALISTS VS NON-EVIDENTIALISTS

In 1876, William K. Clifford published an article on the ethical implications in forming beliefs entitled 'The Ethics of Belief', in which he vehemently defended the thesis that we have to be scrupulous in requiring that every belief must be based on the evidence available to be considered as morally legitimate.

The question of right or wrong has to do with the origin of his belief, not the matter of it; not what it was, but how he got it; not whether it turned out to be true or false, but whether he had a right to believe on such evidence as was before him [Clifford (1876), p. 178].

We know that evidence is a mark of truth and, even more important, we have an obligation towards the other members of society that requires that we

avoid forming beliefs in the absence of significant favourable evidence.³ “To sum up: it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” [Clifford (1876), p. 186].⁴

As is well known, William James replied ten years later in a no less famous article unhappily⁵ entitled ‘The Will to Believe’. The main purpose of James’ paper was to defend the lawfulness of voluntarily adopted faith. He admits that, obviously, whenever the formation of beliefs based on empirical evidence is possible, it would be irrational and ridiculous that the will should come into play. However, sometimes we have a genuine option, i.e. a living, forced, and momentous option for which we have no evidence that supports what to believe. In this case,

[...] our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, [...] for to say, under such circumstances, “Do not decide, but leave the question open,” is itself a passional decision,—just like deciding yes or no,—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth [James (1896), p. 11].

According to James, there are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion: *We must know the truth* and *we must avoid error*. These are two materially different laws. Some prefer the first, and others the second, but neither of them is more rational: it is a passional decision. James’ point is that Clifford chose the second, but in doing so, he renounced any possibility of gaining some truths.

James admits that even in the situation in which we are forced to decide between two options in the absence of evidence — therefore, only on intellectual grounds — whenever the option is not momentous, we should choose the principle of avoiding believing some falsehood renouncing the possibility of gaining the truth [James (1896), pp. 19-20]. However, [...] *a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule* [James (1896), p. 28].

James’ thesis is that sometimes, in relation to forced and *important* questions where, for the nature of the issue, we not only lack evidence, but also could not have access to any body of evidence, we can decide voluntarily to believe or not. What he is defending is *the right* to believe.

This controversial topic has been much discussed, evidentialists being those who follow Clifford in the strict and necessary requirement of evidence in holding beliefs and non-evidentialists those who sympathize with James. Although these two positions have been presented as almost opposite, in fact they are not. James defends — as Clifford does — the importance of the scientific method and the truths reached by it; he also thinks that evidence has an essential role in the formation of the majority of our beliefs. Even with respect to those hypotheses which cannot be decided (*de iure*, not *de facto*) by evidence, James claims that we can abstain from holding a belief if they are

not forced or important hypotheses. However, James thinks that in genuine, important, forced and non empirical disputes, we should have *the right* to decide willingly. Clifford does not maintain that it is impossible to believe under these conditions, but that it is — not only for epistemic but also for *social reasons* — immoral. In this sense, it has been considered that Peirce surely would have agreed with Clifford since Peirce affirms — as we have seen — that “to avoid looking into the support of any belief from a fear that it may turn out rotten is quite as immoral as it is disadvantageous” [Peirce (1877), p. 257]. It is unclear, however, whether in non-empirical matters such as those which James has in mind (religious beliefs, philosophical principles, etc.) it is possible to discover that their support is rotten: if we mean that we may discover that they have no solid support, whatever the kind, Peirce would probably consider the position of James as immoral; but if we mean that we may discover that it is *against the evidence*, it seems clear that, *ex hypothesi*, Peirce would have affirmed that it cannot be so. He does not claim either that evidence is necessary for entertaining a belief; as we have seen, three out of the four methods he presents to fix beliefs are not necessarily based upon evidence. Moreover, Peirce thinks that “the action of thinking may incidentally have other results; it may serve to amuse us, for example, and among *dilettanti* [...] This disposition is the very debauchery of thought” [Peirce (1878), p. 263].⁶ However, he does not seem to consider that believing upon insufficient evidence is always immoral. In this sense, he says:

A man may go through life, systematically keeping out of view all that might cause a change in his opinions, and if he only succeeds — basing his method, as he does, on two fundamental psychological laws — I do not see what can be said against his doing so. It would be an egotistical impertinence to object that his procedure is irrational, for that only amounts to saying that his method of settling belief is not ours. He does not propose to himself to be rational, and, indeed, will often talk with scorn of man’s weak and illusive reason. So let him think as he pleases [Peirce (1877), p. 249-50].

To be honest, Peirce surely was not happy with James’ thesis about believing at will in the absence of evidence, believing in God, or the like, but he does not seem to agree either with Clifford’s thesis that we should never form beliefs in the absence of enough empirical support because of social or moral reasons. Rather, what Peirce remarks is that *whenever we discover that facts do not support our beliefs*, we should abandon them, because acting otherwise would then be the “debauchery of thought.”

Another historical question related with the issue that seems to support James is the famous argument known as *Pascal’s wager*. Pascal defended that believing in God is rational even though we have no evidence at all. Why? Maybe there is an infinity of chances and very few possibilities that God really exists; however, if you wager for God and It really exists, your

gain would be infinite and, if after all you lose, you lose nothing (and vice versa). Precisely for that reason you should believe. At this point, Pascal foresees an inopportune problem to his advice for believing on the basis of probabilistic or rational reasons: maybe, even understanding and accepting the rational proof of the adequacy of believing, you cannot *do* it. Don't worry. If you are rationally convinced, it must be your passional nature that prevents you from believing. So you should work in this area. How do you do this? Take holy water, attend masses... and soon you will believe.

This idea reminds us of the famous Aristotelian motto, "moral virtue comes about as a result of habit" [EN 1103a 17], but it also seems to advise us to ignore the undesired evidence. I think that neither Clifford nor James would accept this argument, due to immoral or irrational reasons. Nevertheless, the interpretation of James Wernham [(1987), pp. 75-80] is not outlandish when he suggests that when Pascal invites us to take the holy water, go to church, etc., he is trying to present the hypothesis of God as more alive to the unbeliever, given that the reason the subject cannot believe lies in the fact that the hypothesis is dead for him. However, there is something that does not fit: I do think that to merely enliven the option is not enough. No doubt, the hypothesis should be alive; but one should also overcome the tendency to adopt the belief policy that you must always avoid mistakes (Clifford); instead, one should embrace the policy that pushes us to find out certain kinds of truth which, by their own nature, cannot have empirical support (James). Only in this way can we have access to certain kinds of truth, and it is difficult to understand how we can reach this point without a personal and passionate decision, as James intended. In any case, this interpretation would bring the accounts of James and Pascal nearer. In fact, James presents something similar: sometimes we have (*de facto*) no evidence for believing something we want to believe, and the only way to obtain this evidential support requires the previous decision to believe it in the absence of evidence.

Do you like me or not? — for example. Whether you do or not depends, in countless instances, on whether I meet you half-way, am willing to assume that you must like me, and show you trust and expectation. The previous faith on my part in your liking's existence is in such cases what makes your liking come. But if I stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence, until you shall have done something apt, as the absolutists say, *ad extorquendum assensum meum*, ten to one your liking never comes [James (1896), 23-24.]

I think that this sort of situation is perfectly possible. However, in these cases, we do not say he has a belief. He rather trusts or hopes that she loves him or pretends to believe it in order to seduce her. Russell made a similar objection when he claimed that we act in many cases on the basis of a hypothesis without believing it. When we are faced with a forced option but do not have enough evidence, we act on the basis of probabilities without enter-

taining any belief. James confuses both attitudes⁷ [Russell (1909), p. 264]. In fact, this observation had been already made by Clifford, when anticipating future critics he says:

There is no practical danger that such consequences will ever follow from scrupulous care and self-control in the matter of belief. [...] Moreover there are many cases in which it is our duty to act upon probabilities, although the evidence is not such as to justify present belief; because it is precisely by such action, and by observation of its fruits, that evidence is got which may justify future belief. So that we have no reason to fear lest a habit of conscientious inquiry should paralyse the actions of our daily life [Clifford (1876), pp. 188-189].

Nevertheless, what I do want to stress is that the disagreement on this point between James and Clifford is not a conceptual question but a verbal one. In fact, it seems to me that what distinguishes these authors is not so much that one holds that beliefs can be formed regardless of evidence and the other does not. Regarding the issues that Clifford has in mind (factual beliefs) both consider that although it is possible to believe irrespective of evidence, it is immoral (Clifford) or irrational and ridiculous (James). What clouds the issue is that Clifford censures every belief without enough evidence. However, I suspect that Clifford is not thinking in any way about religious beliefs, because Clifford surely believes that in this area there could not be beliefs in principle: the definition of belief that Clifford handles does not contemplate that there may be a belief without any evidence.

James, meanwhile, reacts and defends himself against a ghost: he believes that Clifford's claim violates the right to have a guide to action whenever there is no evidence.

Hence, the dispute is really about whether, in certain issues on which we lack *de iure* evidence by its nature, we can have guides to action and whether they can be called beliefs or not. Thus, the debate boils down to how to label a guide to action in the absence of evidence, and therefore it is a verbal question. Although Clifford surely thought that something that serves as a guide to action where there is no evidence cannot be anything other than a hope or a wish, James finds no practical difference between such an attitude and a belief: both are mental attitudes with respect to a particular event involving rules for action and they can be more or less appropriate depending on the results. Since James does not see any pragmatic difference between the two attitudes, both are beliefs; some are based upon evidence and others are not.

II. A CONCEPTUAL ACCOUNT

In contrast to evidentialists and non-evidentialists, Bernard Williams has defended a *conceptual* account in a famous article entitled 'Deciding to believe'. He maintains that *believing just like that is neither possible under*

certain very special conditions (as James defends) *nor possible but immoral* (as Clifford thinks); Williams claims that believing just like that is *conceptually impossible*. It should be noted that he is not theorizing — at least, not directly — about religious and moral beliefs, but cases of more straightforward factual belief,⁸ i.e. the sort of belief that one has when one simply believes that it is raining or that the substance in front is salt. Besides, when he speaks about beliefs they have to be understood as mental states (not as content) [Williams (1973), p. 136].

According to Williams, beliefs have five attributes:

- 1) Beliefs aim at truth.
- 2) The most basic straightforward expression of a belief is an assertion.
- 3) Although an assertion is the most basic straightforward expression of a belief, the assertion is neither a necessary nor — here emphasizes — a sufficient condition.
- 4) Not every belief is based on evidence.
- 5) A belief is an explanatory notion.

That *beliefs aim at truth* means three things: a) unlike other mental states, their content is truth-conditional, b) to believe that *p* is the same as to believe that *p* is true and c), to say ‘I believe that *p*’ carries, in general, the claim that *p* is true (which, as Williams suggests, is related with Moore’s paradox) [Williams (1973), pp. 136-37]. The most direct way of expressing the belief that *p* is the assertion that *p*, and not ‘I believe that *p*’, whose function is, according to Williams, rather special⁹ [Williams (1973), pp. 137-38]. The assertion, however, is neither necessary (there are many beliefs that we neither do nor will make explicit) nor sufficient (because it can be insincere) [Williams (1973), p. 140]. Moreover, not every belief is based on evidence. It is important to stress that Williams means by ‘evidence’ of a belief other beliefs that support the first. What he is saying with regard to the relation between two (or more) beliefs, is not only that the belief that *p* can be adduced for supporting the belief that *q*, but that one belief can *cause* the other. This causal relation may be rational or merely causal. That is, one can believe that *p* because one believes that *q*, the truth of *p* not being a *reason* for the truth of *q*. We will say then that ‘A believes that *p* because A believes that *q*’, but we are not entitled to say ‘*p* because *q*’ since, although there is a connection between beliefs, it is an irrational one [Williams (1973), pp. 141-42]. Beliefs are also explanatory, that is, one can explain what a man does by saying what he believes. However, it is important to note that beliefs are not sufficient in explaining action; we need a third component: the project¹⁰ [Williams (1973), p. 144].

Having settled the conditions for characterizing any belief, Williams examines the possibility of creating a machine which could form beliefs, concluding that the greatest difficulty in its creation would be that this machine would not be able to satisfy the third condition, i.e. that it could not be insincere.¹¹ Williams' point is that will plays an essential role with regard to beliefs: we *willingly express* or not what we believe. However, although will is related to the decision to speak or not to speak, will is not related to the decision to believe (at least as it follows from the above.) That, says Williams, fits the description made by Hume about belief, according to which belief is something that happens to us, a passive phenomenon. However Williams does not agree with Hume about the nature of the phenomenon, for Hume considers it as something *contingent*. In contrast, Williams thinks that it is the very nature of beliefs that precludes will from taking a part in the process of acquiring a belief.

It is not a contingent fact that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I believe something, as it is a contingent fact that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I'm blushing. Why is this? One reason is connected with the characteristic of beliefs that they aim at truth [Williams (1973), p. 148].

If one could believe at will, one should know that one can do it, which means one knows one can form a belief independent of what the evidence tells one about reality. But it is not possible at the same time to think that my belief aims at truth and does not represent reality [Williams (1973), p. 148]. However, although the idea of believing something *just like that* is very odd, Williams wonders if will may have some role in the decision to embrace a belief. He points out that there are processes in which will does not take part — for example one does not blush at will — but even if one could blush at will, it would be a contingent fact, since blushing at will is not inconceivable. Or at least one can imagine a way of blushing “taking a detour” (perhaps imagining an embarrassing situation). The question is then: could we obtain (or reject) a belief by means of more roundabout routes? Williams concedes that it would be possible for will to play a role in producing a belief by means of factors not directly connected with truth, such as hypnotism or drugs¹² [Williams (1973), p. 149]. But these methods are not always effective. The main reason is that there are two kinds of motives for wanting to believe something: truth-centred motives and non-truth-centred. Suppose, says Williams, that a man has strong evidence to believe that his son has drowned at sea. That man wishes strongly to believe that his son is alive. But then, why not go to the hypnotist or take drugs? By means of this method he might embrace the belief he desires. However, does he really simply want to embrace the belief that his son is alive? It seems more appropriate to think that “desires to believe that his son is alive” would have to be interpreted as “desires that the belief is true,” that is, what he wants is that his son really *is* alive. This is

what Williams called “truth-centred motives” [Williams (1973), p. 150]. Hence, in such cases believing at will would not be useful.

On the contrary, in some particular situations, “desires to believe that his son is alive” can be interpreted otherwise. Our man could have a non-truth-centred motive; he would want, of course, for his son to be alive, but after all he knows that he cannot change reality and finds it intolerable; for this reason he wishes to embrace the belief, whether true or not, and thus decides voluntarily to make use of mechanisms such as hypnosis or drugs. According to Williams, this is not inconsistent, but deeply irrational, a project that most of us would reject [Williams (1973), p. 150]. Moreover, this kind of project involves other problems: the nature of our doxastic structure indicates that the elimination of a belief would also require the destruction of all beliefs that entail it, and such a project could eventually involve the partial or total destruction of reality, leading to paranoia [Williams (1973), p. 151].

III. BELIEVING AT WILL AND SELF-DECEPTION

This kind of strategy is very close to some types of self-deception. In fact, even if we think that it is not possible at all to believe something just like that, there is no need to embrace any *roundabout route* in Williams’ terms (drugs or hypnosis), since it has been claimed that it would be possible willingly to deceive oneself or be self-deceived.

Self-deception has been a very controversial issue, due to its paradoxical aspect and irrationality. I cannot deal with it here as I would wish, but I shall say a few words about this puzzling phenomenon. Very roughly speaking, there are two main sets of theories, intentionalists and non-intentionalists. Non-intentionalists are not pertinent here, since they argue that although self-deception is a motivational phenomenon, will does not play any role in the formation or retention of a desired belief. They mainly appreciate non evidential aspects in the formation of beliefs. However, intentionalists have defended that intention and conscious will are the motives in the process of self-deception. Nevertheless, because of the problem of consciously holding contradictory beliefs (the evidential vs. the desired and counterevidential beliefs) they have to propose explanatory hypotheses such as the division of the mind into a main system and subsystems, or other mental exotica, in order to offer some conceptual — although not empirical — explanation of the coexistence of both.

The main problem for these accounts is that we do not gain much if, in trying to solve a problem, we increase the ontological catalogue of mental entities without empirical support. Moreover, if we suppose that the subject cannot consciously hold two evidently contradictory beliefs and propose, for example, two systems for separating them, we only replace the problem. In

fact, what part of the mind decides which of the two beliefs can be consciously expressed and which should be repressed? We need an entity that is conscious of both beliefs and decide between them. But this is, as is clear, to replace the problem inside the mind, as if a homunculus would decide what we have to repress, look for or support.

Other attempts have been proposed to solve the problem which give a role to will and avoid these mental exotica. These kinds of explanations are direct strategies. For example, we could imagine a subject who in order to establish the desired belief, would repeat to himself, contrary to his own evidence, that *p* is the case until — and for as long as — he embraces this belief. This is similar to what Peirce calls “method of tenacity” in examining the methods of fixing beliefs. In a similar way Kent Bach spoke about the insertion of belief, calling this method of acquiring beliefs *jamm*ing. Bach distinguishes between thinking *of p* and thinking *that p*. He claims that sometimes, “a person can believe that *p* without thinking *that p*. Even if he cannot avoid thinking *of p*, he can, whenever *p* occurs to him, think that *not-p*” [Bach (1981), p. 361]. When the issue about *p* arises, the only thing he must do is try to bring to his mind the thought *that-not-p*, and to act as if *p* were not the case, trying to imagine the favourable consequences that would follow if *not-p* were really the case.

Also in similar terms, David Pears says that sometimes, in cases where there is latitude (when the evidence that supports the harmful belief is not conclusive) it is possible to voluntarily self-induce a belief *openly*, that is, where the subject is aware not only of the mechanisms used, but also of the source of his belief. Nevertheless, since the origin is often a desire and desires or wishes do not typically aim at truth — the goal, according to Pears, we all pursue as rational beings — the subject is aware of the irrationality of both the project and the set including counter-evidence and the desired belief, and therefore this kind of *open* self-deception is often doomed to failure. That is why in most cases, the subject does not try to get deceived openly, and needs to hide both the reasons why he biases the evidence and the methods by which he does so. According to Pears, in this case he can succeed. But again it would require some kind of strategy to forget the motive to deceive himself and the origin of his belief, and I have already criticized this above pointing to the reasons for rejecting this kind of explanation. Both Kent Bach and David Pears, among many others, offer these kinds of possible strategies in order to explain the phenomenon. However, since these explanations lead us to pose homunculi, mental exotica or the like that neither solve nor clarify the puzzle, we should reject them. This is not the most appropriate place to develop an accurate account on “typology of self-deception”, so I shall simply revise some ideas as a conclusion.

Thomas Cook (1987) has tried to explain why we could believe at will without being self-deceived. He gives an example suggested by Peter

Skagestad that I shall try to summarize: Nick, an ambitious biology major who desires to succeed as a professional biologist, believes and avows that creationist theory is correct and that revealed scripture, taken literally, is the ultimate arbiter of disputed questions. Nevertheless, he knows that his possibilities are minimal if he does not embrace evolutionist theory, and therefore, decides to believe it. He launches a strategy to do this: as he knows something about the way in which non evidential factors influence beliefs, about social psychology, hermeneutics, philosophy and the like, he decides to go to Harvard for professors, social pressures, etc. force him to acquire the desired belief. Finally, he embraces the belief.

Cook remarks that John Elster, Bernard Williams and David Pears consider that Nick could only do this by means of a roundabout if he forgets or deceives himself about his motives and the origin of his belief. However, he claims that he can prove the falsity of their assumption by filling in the rest of the story:

Six years later, Nick emerges from graduate school, Doctorate in hand, fully versed in and accepting of contemporary biological theory. He remembers quite well the entire story of how he had decided to come to Harvard in the hope that he would be seduced into believing that which he then thought to be false. He smiles inwardly at the benighted bumpkin he was — so benighted that he had thought evidential considerations insufficient to warrant belief in the truth of something as *obviously* true as evolutionary theory [Cook (1987), p. 443].

However, as he himself seems to notice, his example turns out to be a fraud, for Nick starts with an obviously false and unwarranted belief and ends with a true one — or at least well supported by science and evidence. He says,

Most of us would probably agree that Nick moved from an unwarranted belief in a false view to a warranted belief in a true one. But our judgment of the force of the example should not be thought to depend on this fact [Cook (1987), p. 446].

If Cook's thesis were strong enough, he could have chosen another example in contrary circumstances, but he did not. I think that it is clearly not a case of believing at will. Rather, maybe Nick wants to believe something he does not believe, and in trying to do so, discovers that evidence supports the desired belief. But my point is that what convinces Nick is not his desire to believe, but the evidence. Of course, if he had not wished to believe it, maybe he would not have found this evidence, but this case seems to me very close to those of James or Russell, in which we act upon a hypothesis, i.e. without previous belief, and meet evidence half way.

CONCLUSIONS

I consider — as Hume did — that beliefs are something that *happens to us* and of which we are not in control at all.¹³ Unlike Hume, I agree with Bernard Williams that this feature is neither contingent nor psychological, but necessary and conceptual. However, I do not grant Williams that we could acquire or retain a belief in the absence of evidence by taking a detour.¹⁴ The belief, aiming at truth and, therefore, somehow including the assertion that *p* is the case, precludes the will from playing any epistemic role. It is a necessarily involuntary process by its own definition. Indeed, I consider that *a belief consists in the disposition, supported by a significant body of evidence, to affirm or to avow sincerely the truth of something*. First, the belief requires evidence, and secondly, its weight must be *subjectively meaningful*: I *subjectively* consider that the level of support given to the truth of the proposition in question by the data is high, and therefore I feel backed in affirming that proposition. Obviously, the degree of disposition to affirm its truth will vary, depending *not* actually on the evidence *being* more or less conclusive, but on the fact that I *interpret* it in that way. This, of course, does not guarantee the truth of my belief, even when I absolutely believe in its certainty. Once a belief is assumed, I agree with the pragmatist tenets on the role of beliefs as rules for action, though — as Peirce and James indicated — not every belief leads to action immediately.

Therefore, from my point of view, given that the belief is a consequence of the accumulation of significant evidence in the pursuit of, or desire for, a resolution that appeases an irritation by means of seeking the truth, the very nature of the belief prevents the subject from obtaining, forming, acquiring or retaining a belief while he lacks evidence, when he knows his evidence has been willingly adulterated or biased — by himself or someone else — or when the belief he is trying to embrace is not proportional to the empirical evidence effectively available to him. Hence, it follows that direct self-deception is conceptually impossible not only in such cases in which evidence leaves no latitude or has significant weight, but also in cases where there may be the possibility of voluntarily believing under James' terms, that is, where there is not, and cannot be, any empirical evidence. An important point that I would like to recapitulate is that the absence of beliefs does not necessarily preclude action. Although every belief involves a rule for action, not every rule for action consists in a belief. Faith, wishes, hopes, suspicions or fears can play this role and, to a large extent, can work — like beliefs — as a *motive* for action.

Perhaps the attentive reader will have drawn from my view a “surprising” consequence, namely that we do not need to take any care about our beliefs. In other words, we cannot be careless or negligent neither epistemically nor morally in forming our beliefs; since beliefs are a quasi-automatic re-

sponse to relevant evidence useful for facing a problem or doubt, and will or intention have no role in the process of acquiring or maintaining this belief, it follows that we cannot be negligent in this process. However, this is not to say that we cannot fail in attaining the truth or that our beliefs are always true. Evidently, we are not infallible; either in our senses or our recollections or our logical or inferential capacities. But then, are we completely free from responsibility? In fact, we are not. But in order to explain this I have to move the pivotal point of responsibility to another place: the relation between actions or avowals, and beliefs. Sometimes we stop searching for evidence because we are afraid of finding harmful evidence. In this case, we already have a doubt about the issue, and for this reason we have, as Peirce pointed out, no belief at all.¹⁵ Unfortunately,¹⁶ beliefs are not the only kind of mental state whose content serve work as a rule for action, and someone could act based on suspicions, hopes or wishes; these mental states do not aim at truth and for this reason when we act whilst guided by them it is more possible not to succeed or simply be at odds with reality. It is evident that, when in an important issue someone could search for (more) relevant evidence but decides not to do so, and affirms without reservation what it is not legitimate to affirm, or acts whilst pretending to know the truth or the like, he is completely responsible, even culpable.

To sum up, I consider the voluntary and direct self-induction of a belief to be conceptually impossible and that an indirect manner or *'taking a detour'* presents particular problems; indeed there are several conceptual explanations of this phenomenon, but most of them are unsatisfactory for two reasons: either they make the subject aware of both the adulteration of the process and its grounds, since evidence is biased and the *putative* belief so embraced does not point to the truth (this would preclude the formation of any belief), or they involve mental exotica or other *ad hoc* twisted explanations, such as subsystems or the splitting of the mind — that other alternative theories do not require — thus losing ground on real cases and causing in addition persistent allegations of homuncularity.

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NOTES

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¹ “Doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief; while the latter is a calm and satisfactory state which we do not wish to avoid, or to change to a belief in anything else”. [Peirce (1877), p. 247]. By the way, this passage is extremely similar to the following from Ortega, which compares the *firm land* of beliefs with the *unstable sea* of doubts: “[Beliefs] are the firm land on which we toil [...] To be in doubt is like being in an abyss, that is, falling down. It is, therefore, the negation of stability. [...] He tries hard to ‘get out of doubt’ [...] in such a situation is when a man commits a strange act that does not appear to be so: the man starts to think” [“Las creencias son la tierra firme sobre que nos afanamos [...] En la duda se está como en un abismo, es decir, cayendo. Es, pues, la negación de la estabilidad. [...] Se esfuerza en ‘salir de la duda’ [...] en tal situación es cuando el hombre ejercita un extraño hacer que no parece tal: el hombre se pone a pensar” Ortega y Gasset (1940), *Ideas y creencias*. Reprinted in Madrid, Revista de Occidente-Alianza editorial, 2001, pp. 34-37].

² “Our beliefs guide our desires and shape our actions” [Peirce (1877), p. 247].

³ [Clifford (1876), p. 184.] This idea reminds us of the Kantian view in “On a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns”, where he maintains that our obligation always to tell the truth out of personal interests — preventing us from lying, even to save the most innocent of men from the most bloodthirsty murderer — is based on the social pact: we cannot lie because it puts the bonds we have tacitly accepted at risk, which includes at the very basis the mutual confidence of all members. Any lie from one member would introduce a rotten element into the whole and would legitimize any subsequent lie.

⁴ Clifford’s words, it seems, are echoed in Peirce: “to avoid looking into the support of any belief from a fear that it may turn out rotten is quite as immoral as it is disadvantageous” [Peirce (1877), p. 257].

⁵ James regretted choosing this as soon as his ideas provoked unexpected reactions and misinterpretations. He said it would have been better to entitle it “The *Right to Believe*”.

⁶ In a similar vein, Clifford had expressed: “It is desecrated when given to unproved and unquestioned statements, for the solace and private pleasure of the believer” [Clifford (1876), p. 183].

⁷ “In the cases which William James has in mind, the option between rival hypotheses is, he says, a ‘forced’ option; i.e. it is not avoidable: ‘If I say, “Either accept this truth or go without it,” I put on you a forced option, for there is no standing place outside of the alternative.’ This statement appears to us to be contrary to many of the plainest facts of daily life. If, in walking along a country road, I come to a fork where there is no signpost and no passer-by, I have, from the point of view of action, a “forced” option. I must take one road or other if I am to have any chance of reaching my destination; and I may have no evidence whatever as to which is the right road, I then *act* on one or other of the two possible hypotheses, until I find some one of whom I can ask the way. But I do not *believe* either hypothesis. My action is either right or wrong, but my belief is neither, since I do not entertain either of the two pos-

sible beliefs. The pragmatist assumption that I believe the road I have chosen to be the right one is erroneous. To infer belief from action, in the crude way involved in the assumption that we must “either accept this truth or go without it”, is to ignore the plain fact that our actions are constantly based upon probabilities, and that, in all such cases, we neither accept a truth nor go without it, but entertain it as an hypothesis” [Russell (1909), p. 264].

⁸ It is not clear whether, in spite of taking into account only common beliefs for the purposes of explanation, he considers that the conclusions reached can be extended to other beliefs. If it is not the case, I do not know the reason Williams has in mind for excluding moral or religious beliefs, but obviously in that case the points made by Williams do not affect James’ thesis in the same way, since James defended believing at will in very special cases.

⁹ “The most elementary and straightforward expression of the belief that it is raining is to say ‘it is raining’, not to say ‘I believe that it’s raining’. ‘I believe that it’s raining’ does a rather special job” [Williams (1973), p. 137]. This claim from Williams seems to be at least contrary to common sense, and probably mistaken. While it is true that we can express — and in fact on many occasions we do — our belief that *p* through an assertion that *p*, it is not always true that this happens, not even in most cases. Indeed, it is not exceptional to say ‘I believe that *p*’. The point made by Williams really rests on the fact that he makes no distinction between belief and knowledge or at least confuses them. I suspect that when he contends that the assertion ‘I believe that *p*’ is derived and strange, he is thinking about things we know and do not believe (or not merely believe). Indeed, the example that Williams himself gives turns out to be instructive (although against his own position and argumentative interests): we usually say ‘it is raining’, true, but the reason is not that this is a primary form of assertion of a belief; rather, the actual reason is that normally when we say this, we *know* it. If we simply have a recollection of having heard a soft murmuring of rain half an hour before, we may doubt if it is still raining and we could say ‘I believe it’s raining’. Another example that Williams argues in his own defence but again seems to strengthen our view runs as follows: “if somebody says to me: Where is the railroad station? And I say ‘I believe that it’s three blocks down and to the right’ he will have slightly less confidence in my utterances than if I just say ‘It’s three blocks down and to the right’” [Williams (1973), p. 138]. Obviously, when we believe something, we are less secure than when we know it. Unfortunately, only on very few occasions is our *subjective* evidence complete, say “grade 1”. In fact, since beliefs are gradual, they can be very weak. Naturally this is often reflected in our assertions. Therefore the argument Williams presents seems to be misguided. Rather, we could defend the opposite: sometimes, one expresses a belief (even a weak belief) masked in the form of an assertion to attain and pretend a “stolen security.”

¹⁰ “A standard example of this is: I see a man walking with a determined and heavy step onto a certain bridge. We say that it shows that the bridge is safe, but this, of course is namely, to avoid getting drowned. If this were a man who surprisingly had the project of falling in the river, then his walking with a firm step onto this bridge would not necessary manifest the belief that the bridge was safe” [Williams (1973), p. 144]. I suppose there is no crucial difference here between “project” and “intention.”

¹¹ Williams distinguishes between beliefs and B-states, which would be “im-poverished beliefs” (because they do not satisfy clause 3) [Williams (1973), pp. 145-47]. I consider this thesis of Williams as misguided. Even granting we could ascribe “beliefs” to machines — I am quite reluctant to accept this thesis — the reasons Williams put forward for distinguishing between B-states and beliefs seem to me too weak. That a machine cannot be disingenuous or lie does not demonstrate that it has no beliefs; at the most it only indicates that we can rely on its assertions (under ideal conditions, provided that it has reliable stimuli receptors, inferential processes, etc., and the machine is not damaged or broken.) In the case of human beings, the willingness to say (or not say) what one thinks, prevents the direct ascription of any particular belief, and therefore, we cannot rely on their assertions. But then, the alleged B-statements are not a different kind of mental state. At most, machines lack the capacity of lying, which would not affect or modify the state itself, but its expression.

Another problematic thesis, which will not be discussed as much as it would be necessary, runs as follows. Williams says regarding a machine: ‘there could be false B-states that the machine was in; accidentally or randomly true B-states; and non-accidentally true B-states, that is B-states which were connected with the fact that they were true, and these last we could call Knowledge’. However, this thesis with regard to knowledge is dependent on the *situation of the examiner* that Williams himself had previously rejected. I think that knowledge is a reflexive act, i.e. when a subject knows something, then he knows that he knows it (and why he knows it). A machine in a B-state, being neither conscious nor capable of knowing if the content of this state is true or false, that is, with no justification (that “something else” that Williams denies to machines) could not have such a mental state as knowledge, even if its belief were true and based on facts.

In short, Williams is not only incapable of distinguishing between B-states and beliefs, but the characterization of the relationship between belief and knowledge he provides is misguided.

¹² Although Williams concedes that it is not only possible but common that people deceive themselves coming to believe things that are untrue, he refuses to discuss the issue of self-deception.

¹³ In fact, Hume thinks that since our knowledge is not infallible, trust or certainty on empirical data can vary with respect to different matters. In these circumstances, “a wise man proportions his belief to the evidence” [SB, p. 110]. This seems to indicate that we do not always proportion our beliefs to evidence, and wisdom consists in doing so. However, in another passage Hume makes it clear that beliefs are out of our control: “It follows, therefore, that the difference between fiction and belief lies in some sentiment or feeling, which is annexed to the latter, not to the former, and which *depends not on the will, nor can be commanded at pleasure*. It must be excited by nature, like all other sentiments; and must arise from the particular situation, in which the mind is placed at any particular juncture. Whenever any object is presented to the memory or senses, it immediately, by the force of custom, carries the imagination to conceive that object, which is usually conjoined to it; and this conception is attended with a feeling or sentiment, different from the loose reveries of the fancy. In this consists the whole nature of belief” [SB, p. 48, my italics].

¹⁴ Strictly speaking, I do not even consider hypnosis or drugs as “proofs” of believing without evidence; rather, accepting these kinds of cases as possible, we can

suppose that in these situations in fact we have evidence for beliefs obtained by these methods; it is a special type of evidence, and surely not very reliable or not reliable at all, but even our more reliable methods for obtaining evidence are not infallible. What is more, it is not important that the evidence *be* trustworthy or biased; what really matters is that the subject *thinks it is* trustworthy, i.e., the *subjective assessment* of the evidence.

¹⁵ “[...] when they see that any belief of theirs is determined by any circumstance extraneous to the facts, will from that moment not merely admit in words that that belief is doubtful, but will experience a real doubt of it, so that it ceases to be a belief” [Peirce (1877), p. 253].

¹⁶ I do mean that, if we could always act based on beliefs, it would be better to do so, precisely because of the fact that beliefs are based on evidence, and therefore, they aim at truth. But to act based on other mental states is not always “unfortunate”. In some situations it is very useful to act faithfully (with no previous belief) for searching favourable evidence or solving a problem. In other cases we can act on the basis of hopes, suspicions, wishes, or other mental dispositions. These dispositions are not beliefs at all.

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