

Belief, Agency and Negative Doxastic Control

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“This belief, like all our most fervent beliefs, was largely a matter of will.”

Michael Chabon - *Summerland*

Table of Contents

Abstract	v
Statement of Candidate	vi
Acknowledgments.....	vii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1 – Background	8
1.1 What is a Belief?	8
1.1.1 Definitions and Terminology	8
1.1.2 Motivating Factors: Epistemic or Practical?	9
1.1.3 Degrees of Belief	11
1.1.4 Definitions Re-examined and a Working Definition	12
1.2 Belief Control and its Types	13
1.2.1 Executive.....	13
1.2.2 Volitional	14
1.2.3 Positive.....	15
1.2.4 Negative	15
1.3 What Counts as Doxastic Agency?.....	16
1.3.1 Voluntarist Conception	16
1.3.2 Agential Constraints.....	17
1.3.3 Positive Volitional Rejections of Doxastic Agency.....	18
1.4 Thesis	19
1.4.1 Methodology	20
1.5 Assumptions and Limitations	22
1.5.1 Free Will vs Determinism.....	22
1.5.2 Doxastic Responsibility	23
Chapter 2 – The Empirical Defence of Involuntarism	26
2.1 Introduction.....	26
2.2 Empirical Doxastic Involuntarism	27
2.2.1 Classic Account	27
2.2.2 Intermediate Replies	31
2.3 Limitations	35
2.3.1 Destructive Thesis.....	36
2.3.2 Objection and Reply	38
2.4 Conclusion	39

Chapter 3 – The Conceptual Defence of Involuntarism.....	41
3.1 Introduction.....	41
3.2 Conceptual Doxastic Involuntarism.....	42
3.2.1 Classic Account	42
3.2.2 Intermediate Replies	46
3.3 Limitation.....	48
3.3.1 Destructive Thesis.....	49
3.3.2 Objection and Reply	53
3.4 Conclusion	53
Chapter 4 – Belief, Agency and Negative Doxastic Control	56
4.1 Introduction.....	56
4.2 Negative Doxastic Control - Removing a Belief.....	57
4.3 Negative Doxastic Control - Maintaining a Belief.....	61
4.4 Doxastic Agency: A Wider Lens	65
4.5 Future Investigation	69
4.6 Conclusion	70
Conclusion	72
Bibliography	75

Abstract

We commonly refer to the actions performed by an individual, which align with their intentions and goals, as expressions of agency. This is due, at least in part, to that individual's ability to control what they do. It has become near-orthodoxy however to assert an involuntarist position that we have no, or at least very limited, agential control over our beliefs. Two of the most influential defences of the involuntarist account assert that either beliefs are empirically constrained to be more or less passive responses to our available evidence, or that beliefs are conceptually governed only by considerations of what is true. I argue that both of these defences are problematic because what is apparent in their formulation is an overreliance on investigating the control (or lack thereof) that individuals possess in acquiring beliefs. Subsequently, insufficient attention has centred on the control individuals can exhibit over belief removal. Within this context, I defend the two central claims of this thesis, firstly, that the conclusions reached by the prevailing involuntarist arguments do not sufficiently rule out the conceptual viability of doxastic agency. Secondly, that the concept of Negative Doxastic Control - direct control that we can exhibit over the removal of reasonably held beliefs - in conjunction with many of the precepts of the existing literature can widen the lens of our considerations of doxastic agency, showing ultimately that doxastic agency, properly conceived, is indeed conceptually viable.

Statement of Candidate

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled 'Belief, Agency and Negative Doxastic Control' has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree to any other university or institutions other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that this thesis is an original piece of research and has been written by me. Any assistance I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis has been appropriately acknowledged.

Finally, I certify that all information sources and literature used have been indicated in the thesis.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rj Varley', with a stylized, cursive script.

Russell Varley (41344103)

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What follows is of course a Master's thesis, but it is also a humble representation of the good that can come from the collegiality of Philosophy and Philosophers. It is safe to say that, to paraphrase Donne's famous line, 'no thesis is an island entire to itself', and this work, I truly believe, would not have been possible without the guidance, support and generosity of some exceptional people. My attempt here to write a meaningful thesis has been, in part, to say 'thank you' but more importantly to show them that their efforts have not gone unnoticed.

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Introduction

A recent poll conducted by YouGov asked respondents to register their beliefs on whether the world is flat or round. It seems a rather obvious answer. The world is round. But of the more than 8000 respondents, 7% answered that they had doubts about the shape of our planet and 2% claimed that they had “always believed the world is flat.”¹ An intuitive response to this kind of data might be to ask: how could anyone believe that? Or to perhaps more forcefully admonish: what an absurd thing to believe! A strong motivation for these reactions, roughly construed, is an underlying feeling that these people ought to be held responsible for their strange beliefs because, to a greater or lesser extent, they were capable of believing otherwise. Indeed, a central and widely discussed feature of our assertions of responsibility for a person’s beliefs begins with a natural appeal to that person’s capacity to exercise some measure of control over what they do and believe.² Beliefs, however, do not seem to map onto this framework as regularly as actions do. Suppose for example that you are staring out of your bedroom window and happen to see that it is raining. It is not ‘up to you’ whether or not you believe that it is raining because your belief, in this instance, is a passive response to the available evidence. Indeed, cases such as this have led authors to conclude that ‘motivations such as intentions and decisions to act... are not directly subject to the will’.³ It may appear therefore that beliefs are not as ‘up to us’ as we may have first thought, yet our intuitive responses to beliefs like those of the ‘Flat-Earthers’ persist.⁴

Epistemologists attracted to analysing the characteristics of doxastic agency drawn out by situations like the example above have similarly trended towards two distinct positions. Firstly, a minority of authors have argued that we do in fact have control over our beliefs, at

¹ Source: <https://today.yougov.com/topics/philosophy/articles-reports/2018/04/02/most-flat-earthers-consider-themselves-religious>

² This is a well-argued point, strongly formulated by McCormick (2011).

³ Pink, Thomas. "Reason, voluntariness, and moral responsibility." *Mental actions* (2009): 95-120. Pg. 106.

⁴ Recent reports from Turri et al (2015 and 2018) showed that there is a robust folk sense that beliefs are in some way voluntary. Their reports underscore some of the division between the philosophical literature and our common understandings of belief.

least in some instances. These doxastic voluntarists contend that, more or less analogously to our agency over our actions, we are capable of exercising the power of our will in command of our beliefs.⁵ While this position seems to be given credence by our initial intuitive responses to the survey respondent's beliefs in a flat Earth, a majority of authors have argued that there are important reasons to disfavour this view of doxastic agency. Firstly, it is argued that we are empirically constrained to believe only that which responds to the evidence, and secondly, that we are conceptually bound to accord our beliefs only with what is true. The doxastic involuntarist position therefore denies that we have the ability to control our beliefs via our will because beliefs are 'passive'⁶ in response to the evidence, and that "the seamless shift in focus from belief to truth is not a quirky feature of human psychology, but something that is demanded by the nature of first-personal doxastic deliberation."⁷

The forthcoming is, in its most basic form, a thesis concerned with human agency. In finer detail, this project is aimed at improving the current understanding of how agents can exercise control over their beliefs. It is important to claim at the outset of this work however, that the problem of doxastic agency as I have identified it, deals in a stronger sense of the concept than is usually the case. In this work, I am investigating, and subsequently affirming the claim that agents, in some cases, can exercise direct basic control over their beliefs in much the same way that they can exhibit such control over their actions. It is not my contention however to claim that this type of control is total or arbitrary as it is in a great number of actions, rather, the doxastic control and resulting doxastic agency for which I advocate is confined to a specific set of cases.

In pursuit of these conclusions, I critically reflect on the ongoing debate about our doxastic agency and advance two interrelated theses, one destructive and one constructive. The destructive thesis asserts that the current conceptual assumptions concerning doxastic

⁵ Cohen, Alix. "Kant on doxastic voluntarism and its implications for epistemic responsibility." *Kant Yearbook* (2013): 33-50. Pg. 35.

⁶ Feldman, Richard. "Voluntary belief and epistemic evaluation." *Knowledge, truth, and duty: Essays on epistemic justification, responsibility, and virtue* (2001): 77-92. Pg. 83.

⁷ Shah, Nishi. "How truth governs belief." *The Philosophical Review* 112, no. 4 (2003): 447-482. Pg. 447.

agency have focused too narrowly on belief acquisition. The constructive thesis presents a new way of conceptually understanding the control that we exert over our beliefs, and by extension, reveals a broader understanding of our doxastic agency. While I advance this thesis in destructive and constructive formulations, formulations which I will soon outline, accepting only the destructive portions of my thesis will advance (if only slightly) debates concerning doxastic agency. I do however wish to persuade the reader that the constructive formulation is true.

The destructive thesis will show that the current debate around doxastic agency has treated the concept of doxastic control as an almost exclusively ‘positive’ thesis. As a result, the existing literature has been limited to answering questions of whether or not agents exert voluntary control over belief acquisition and is consequently ill-equipped to forcefully bear on the whole range of questions of doxastic agency. To this point, Rott (2017) summarises the current state of the debate well by claiming that “doxastic voluntarism is usually understood as a positive thesis regarding the formation or acquisition of new beliefs,”⁸ but that there is no ‘accompanying examination of the control (or lack thereof) that agents possess over belief elimination’.⁹ By mounting objections to the existing framework, the dominant positions and their leading challengers, commit themselves to an incomplete conceptual framework and to conclusions which are at odds with at least some of our common and empirical understandings of belief. Insofar as the current debate attempts to settle the question of whether or not we are doxastic agents in terms of belief control, it so far appears incomplete.

This incompleteness, some have claimed, is evidenced by developments in the fields of cognitive science, folk psychology, and formal epistemology which have shown distinct asymmetries in our control over belief.¹⁰ Acquisition on the one hand is represented as a commonly automatic process whereas belief abandonment on the other is regularly a far more

⁸ Rott, Hans. "Negative Doxastic Voluntarism and the concept of belief." *Synthese* 194, no. 8 (2017): 2695-2720. Pg. 2696.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Consider the following from Gilbert (1991), “People believe in the ideas they comprehend, as quickly and automatically as they believe in the objects they see. (Pg. 107)” This argument is, however, not limited to Gilbert, as we shall see in the forthcoming.

deliberate and voluntary process. By limiting the focus on questions of belief control to only those concerned with the positive voluntarist thesis, I submit, does not account for the breadth of our doxastic agency because a non-trivial amount of what can be called doxastic control emerges from our responses to incompatible belief sets and epistemic conflicts (these will be explained in the following chapters). And, although this asymmetry has been developed in the fields of cognitive science and formal epistemology, “the philosophical conceptualisation of doxastic states and the evaluation of methods of changing them bring new work for epistemologists.”¹¹

The beginning of the constructive portion of my thesis will argue that Negative Doxastic Control - as distinct from the positive doxastic control thesis - can have something to say about our conceptual understanding of doxastic agency insofar as this agency accounts for belief control. This portion of my thesis will show the reader that the standing empirical and conceptual defences of involuntarism do not actually reveal very much about our doxastic agency with respect to intentions when we consider how agents form beliefs and how agents deliberate on what to believe respectively. The conclusion of the constructive element of my thesis will argue that direct belief control is possible and in some way constitutive of doxastic agency.

The novelty of my approach in this section comes from the fact that I do not wish to advance my thesis to the exclusion of what has come before, rather, my constructive thesis seeks to consolidate many of the existing involuntarist precepts with the important contributions made by Negative Doxastic Control. This consolidated theory, I claim, will demonstrate the conceptual viability of Negative Doxastic Control and our doxastic agency. In sum, the view I put forward will argue that, (i) doxastic agency requires some measure of intentional control over beliefs, (ii) Negative Doxastic Control exhibits such control, therefore (iii) as a cooperation between Negative Doxastic Control and the existing literature, doxastic

¹¹ Rott, Hans. "Negative Doxastic Voluntarism and the concept of belief." *Synthese* 194, no. 8 (2017): 2695-2720. Pg. 2718.

agency is conceptually viable. This view, I claim, is commensurate with available scientific theories and is also rationally justifiable. In what follows, I aim to convince the reader of these theses. So, following the tentative introductions to this topic made in Rott's (2017) paper, I aim at delivering a more robust account of our negative doxastic capabilities by contrasting these characteristics with the standing positive rebukes of intentional doxastic agency.¹²

In chapter 1 I cover the background of the current debate and establish with more clarity the key concepts that will be evaluated. Beginning with an explication of the difficulties inherent to attempts to nail down an agreeable definition of what constitutes belief and agency, this chapter will construct the framework upon which the following chapters will be built.

In chapter 2 I will investigate the current arguments concerning the problem of doxastic voluntarism and illuminate the first of the two major defences of doxastic involuntarism, particularly the 'empirical defence'. This chapter is aimed at highlighting the conceptual insufficiencies of the current empirical attempts to disprove doxastic agency as they are highlighted by cases in which beliefs are formed more-or-less automatically. More specifically, I will argue that these insufficiencies demonstrate that by focusing on belief acquisition, the empirical defence of involuntarism does not prove as much as it portends to. This conclusion, I submit, opens the conceptual space for applications of Negative Doxastic Control.

In chapter 3 I will investigate the second of the major defences of involuntarism, namely the 'conceptual defence' and show that it too suffers from conceptual insufficiencies when attempting to ground a complete understanding of doxastic agency. These insufficiencies, I will argue, are highlighted by an over-idealised understanding of an agent's

¹² What motivates my argument is the distinction made by Schroeder (2017) 'while it has been shown *that* negative doxastic control is true, there is no such account of *why* it is true. (Pg. 365)' To do this I employ a comparative strategy. I thank Nevin Climenhaga for bringing this strategy to my attention.

deliberative processes. Additionally, I argue that because conceptual accounts of doxastic control are limited, Negative Doxastic Control can again prove beneficial.

In chapter 4 I will explicate and defend the main idea of my thesis, particularly that we can exhibit wilful control over our beliefs with respect to whether we (i) jettison a belief when it becomes incompatible with another due to newly acquired information or (ii) maintain a previously held belief in response to epistemic conflict. Ultimately, I focus on Negative Doxastic Control as a mechanism through which we can defend the viability of intentional doxastic agency and reframe the current debate.

Chapter 1 - Background

1.1 What is a Belief?

1.1.1 Definitions and Terminology

A natural concern, when entering into discussion of beliefs and actions, may be to ask, “what does it mean to say that you believe?” This, at least superficially, seems a rather simple question to answer. I believe that the Earth revolves around the Sun and that the Earth, contra the Flat-Earthers, is round and not flat. However, as gestured to above, many of our common understandings of what actually constitutes a belief belie the complexity of the task of formally constructing an acceptable definition of what a belief is. However, if belief is to be considered and analysed as a distinct conceptual type, there must be an account of belief wherein we can identify at least some of its properties. Just what these properties are however, still remains contentious.

An initial problem is that the concept of belief traverses many different areas of philosophical investigation, with this conceptual porousness resulting in a typically amorphous character.¹³ In common usage, we tend to suggest that an agent believes that *p* just in case she is disposed to act in a way that makes sense on the supposition that *p*. This dispositional account mirrors the dictionary definition¹⁴ and seems to capture something intuitive; that to believe requires us to adopt certain behavioural tendencies which reflect our belief in a particular proposition.¹⁵ Alternatively, many contemporary analytic philosophers of mind use the term “belief” to refer to the attitude we have, roughly, whenever we take something to be the case or regard it as true. On this representationalist account, a believer is said to have a “propositional attitude” which represents an agent’s belief as being a discrete

¹³ Vahid, Hamid. *The Epistemology of Belief*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, offers a very good overview of the epistemic problems associated with defining belief.

¹⁴ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/belief>

¹⁵ Ryle, Gilbert. “The concept of mind.” London, UK: Hutchinson, (1949) argued along these lines that sugar has the disposition to dissolve in water. The dispositional account of belief has been widely contested and I do not intend a specific defence of it here.

mental state.¹⁶ This account is then commonly expressed as some derivation of the form ‘S A that P’ in which S represents the subject within whom the mental state/s are located, A represents the particular attitude or take of the subject, and P represents the proposition. In short, an agent on this account is said to believe when they acquire a propositional attitude entailing their confidence in or apprehension of a proposition. Importantly, with these claims, philosophers designate a feature of belief according to which believing a proposition carries with it some sort of commitment toward the truth. If someone believes that the Earth is flat, then surely they endorse the further claim that their belief is grounded by their commitment to the truth, or disposition to act as though it were the truth, that the Earth is indeed flat.

While there is much to agree with within this description, it remains however problematically coarse-grained. For instance, at least two probative questions emerge; if a propositional attitude is a constitutive requirement for a belief, how does an agent arrive at a particular propositional attitude in the first place? Secondly, how can we differentiate between a belief and other types of confidences in a proposition, like faith? In the following sections I offer examples which will help develop a minimally operative understanding of what we mean when referring to belief.

1.1.2 Motivating Factors: Epistemic or Practical?

As we have seen, it is possible to construe the nature of belief as having a special kind of relationship to the truth or at least to a believer’s take on the truth-value of a proposition. This singular idea however does not seem to fully articulate the dimensions of belief. Consider again the 2% of survey respondents who believe in a flat Earth. According to some approximation of the belief-truth relationship, they must contend that what they believe is by some token true. However, this will strike many as irrational, begging the question of how Flat-Earther’s can make this claim, indeed, what motivates their belief in the first place? One

¹⁶ This picture of belief has been famously argued for by, Fodor, Jerry A. *Psychosemantics: The problem of meaning in the philosophy of mind*. Vol. 2. MIT press, 1987.

of the most influential answers to this question is that beliefs are inexorably linked to evidence.¹⁷ Consequently, the evidentialist argument holds, broadly construed, that beliefs can only be properly caused by evidence because only evidence can provide a motivating reason for belief. Indeed, in its extreme formulation, authors such as Adler¹⁸ contend that a belief not grounded by evidence is not a belief at all. While this extreme view is not one widely shared, in more conservative guises evidentialist arguments provide a comprehensive take on what motivates belief. So, at first pass, what motivates the Flat-Earther's beliefs can be explained by their appropriation of evidence.

Within the recent literature however, challenges have been made which attempt to establish whether the appropriate conditions for beliefs that fall outside of the traditional evidentialist structure can be created. For the most part, these challenges have sought to answer the question of whether we can believe without epistemic motivations? For what amounts to a non-epistemic motivation for belief, take, for example, the famous scene from *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* where Indiana is faced with a seemingly impossible task; he must leap, unassisted, from one side of a vast crevasse to the other. Indiana reasonably doubts his ability to make the immense leap without falling to his death so he pauses and contemplates what to do. As his father lay dying outside of the cave he yells to Indiana, "you must believe!" It is only if Indiana truly believes that he will successfully make the jump that he has any chance of making it to the other side. Indiana then summons the belief and steps out into the abyss. To his amazement, a path appears and he is able to walk safely to the other side of the crevasse.¹⁹ In this example, Indiana summons a belief on the basis of practical considerations; to get to the other side he must first believe that he will make it.²⁰ This example draws out the contention that "agents can use evidence as a mere means by which to

¹⁷ In, Way, Jonathan. "Two arguments for evidentialism." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 265 (2016): 805-818, the author gives a very good account of the main arguments for evidentialism.

¹⁸ Adler, Jonathan E. "Akratic believing?" *Philosophical Studies* 110, no. 1 (2002): 1-27.

¹⁹ "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, 1989." *Steven Spielberg, Lucasfilm Ltd./Paramount Pictures, United States* 127.

²⁰ This scenario is very similar to William James' famous crevasse jumper (1897: 57).

believe, with practical considerations serving as motivating reasons for belief,”²¹ and provides us with our first additional doxastic property; that when it comes to how reasons effect beliefs, both epistemic and practical motivations can prove influential.

1.1.3 Degrees of Belief

To answer the second question posed in section 1.1.1, we can turn again to an example. Consider that Janine (being a non-scholar) simultaneously believes three independent propositions; firstly, that the hunting habits of the Short Nosed bear inhibited historical human migration into North America, secondly, that smoking causes cancer, and thirdly, that she is currently drinking coffee. It seems apparent that Janine would not have the same confidence in proposition 1 as she might have in proposition 3 yet we can intuitively accept that she believes all three. Proposition 1 relies substantially on speculative testimony whereas proposition 3 is as obvious as any proposition could be, thus Janine believes it with near-certainty. Authors have suggested that we in fact hold the bulk of our beliefs in a similar confidence hierarchy. From this, it becomes possible to plot belief on a scale from 0 to 1, whereby each gradation from 0 - which indicates no belief - to 1 - which indicates certainty, delineates an increase in the believer’s confidence in a proposition. Within this formalized conception it becomes possible to indicate one’s “degree of belief” with numbers greater than .5 indicating the holding of a belief.²²

Some authors however, such as Plantinga object to this idea of a belief being generated by confidence greater than .5, arguing that ‘if my only ground for Christian teaching is its probability with respect to K (background knowledge) and all I know about that probability is that it is greater than .5, then I cannot rationally believe that teaching.’²³ Indeed, Schellenberg

²¹ Rinard, Susanna. "Believing for Practical Reasons." *Nous*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12253>. Pg. 3. A number of other authors also support this conclusion, including Leary (2017) and Bondy (2015)

²² For a strong development of this argument, see, Skyrms, Brian. "Choice and chance: An introduction to inductive logic." (1967).

²³ Plantinga, Alvin. *Warranted Christian belief*. Oxford University Press on Demand, 2000. Pg. 274. Similar arguments are also in Plantinga, Alvin. *Warrant: The current debate*. Oxford University Press on Demand, 1993.

(2005) has also argued that beliefs are all-or-nothing concepts,²⁴ however, if we are to take the above example as instructive, then we may find these objections problematic. At a minimum “beliefs should,” as Rott (2009) instructs, ‘be ranked higher than disbeliefs, and non-beliefs in the narrow sense should find a place between beliefs and disbeliefs.’²⁵ Alston formulates it this way:

If S believes that p, then if S considers whether it is the case that p, S will tend to feel it to be the case that p with one or another degree of confidence.²⁶

From this we may articulate another additional property of belief, that when we believe we do so with a confidence greater than .5.

1.1.4 Definitions Re-examined and a Working Definition

In tracing some of the themes which complicate attempts to formulate a stable definition of belief, what becomes clearer is that there is at least one common theme which obtains; a belief seems to represent a particular subject’s take on a state in the world. This is an additional individuating characteristic of beliefs which helps to distinguish believing from purely speculative thinking. Whether we consider Indiana Jones’ ascription of non-epistemic reasons for making his leap of faith or Janine’s take on her three propositions, these examples assert that beliefs have a ‘mind-to-world’ direction of fit. What this means is that beliefs “aim at fitting the world,”²⁷ so that ‘when it comes right down to it, [the believer] is simply thinking of the world.’²⁸ Schellenberg presents this formulation thusly:

²⁴ Schellenberg, John L. *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion*. Cornell University Press, 2005. Pg. 52.

²⁵ Rott, Hans. "Degrees all the way down: Beliefs, non-beliefs and disbeliefs." In *Degrees of belief*, pp. 301-339. Springer, Dordrecht, 2009. Pg. 302.

²⁶ Alston, William P. *Faith, freedom, and rationality: philosophy of religion today*. Rowman & Littlefield, 1996. Pg. 4. While Alston contends that confidence is necessary for belief he stops short of claiming that it is sufficient for belief.

²⁷ Price, Huw. "Defending desire-as-belief." *Mind* 98, no. 389 (1989): 119-127. Pg. 120.

²⁸ Schellenberg, John L. *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion*. Cornell University Press, 2005. Pg. 46-47.

S is disposed to apprehend the state of affairs reported by p, when that state of affairs comes to mind, under the concept reality.²⁹

From these theoretical principles we arrive at a picture of beliefs as states that: 1) Are motivated by either epistemic or practical reasons. 2) Possess a degree of confidence greater than .5. 3) Constitute an agent's take on a state of affairs in the world. We can appropriate these properties as forming a 'working definition' of belief, a definition which awaits reconsideration should better understandings come to light. This account may strike many as being neutral on many issues, such as arguments concerning representationalism versus dispositionalism for example. This is an intentional result as I do not take any one particular account to be wholly correct. Rather, I see the nature of belief as traversing the boundaries of a number of these theories.³⁰

1.2 Belief Control and its Types

1.2.1 Executive Control.

The second major obstacle for the progression of this thesis is to develop a firmer understanding of the mechanisms of voluntary belief control. Voluntary control, it has been argued, turns on at least two intermediary apparatuses.³¹ The initial apparatus by which agents may exhibit, or indeed fail to exhibit, voluntary control over their beliefs is via an executive function. We can see that the individual who lacks executive control over their beliefs is incapable of making wilful and effective discretionary decisions regarding what they believe. To return to the above example, our inability to believe that it is not raining when we plainly see that it is amounts to a lack of executive control over our believing. Consider the following examples from Steup (2011) which go to illuminate this type of control.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Pg. 50.

³⁰ It is not within the purview of this thesis however to fully explicate my neutral account.

³¹ Steup, Matthias. "Belief, voluntariness and intentionality." *Dialectica* 65, no. 4 (2011): 537-559

Paralysed Peter: Due to a stroke, Peter encounters sudden paralysis of his left arm. He wants to raise his arm to reach for his coffee, but his arm won't move.

Twitching Tom: His eye lid twitches. Tom tries to stop it, but with no success.³²

For an agent to possess executive control over beliefs it is necessary that “one can ϕ if one decides to ϕ , and (ii) one can refrain from ϕ -ing if one decides to refrain from ϕ -ing,”³³ from this we can conclude that in these examples, both Peter and Tom lack executive control.

1.2.2 Volitional Control.

Secondly, our control over our beliefs may be hampered by an inability to control ourselves at all. This, again according to Steup, indicates that we lack volitional control over our believing. This control is inhibited when our believing is not preceded by an intention to believe because we lack the ability to control our intentions. Steup employs the following examples in order to contrast this type of control with the previous.

Agoraphobic Al: His friends are taking a walk in the park, but Al decides to stay at home because he suffers from agoraphobia: an irrational and excessive fear of wide open places.

Misophobic Mel: Although he has perfectly clean hands, he decides to wash them for the 67th time since he got up in the morning. He does this because he suffers from misophobia: an irrational and excessive fear of germs and contamination.³⁴

We can think about this type of control in terms of an agent's inability to stop the various actions associated with their illness. So, even though Al and Mel may wish to stop

³² *Ibid.*, Pg. 541.

³³ *Ibid.*, Pg. 542.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

their behaviours, they are unable to voluntarily control the intentional mechanisms which regulate them.

1.2.3 Positive Control

A third type of control, upon which this thesis turns, is positive belief control. In contrast to the two previous types, positive control does not represent a particular mechanism, but should rather be considered a belief control category. Positive control of beliefs thus categorises cases of believing which see the agent believe a previously unbelieved proposition, thus going from no belief that p to belief that p . This is classed as positive because it indicates that the agent has acquired a belief where no belief existed before thus adding to the agent's total belief set. To illustrate this more fully, we can turn to a slightly altered version of Rott's (2017) articulation, wherein Row 1 indicates positive control over beliefs:³⁵

Table 1:

	Posterior State	
Prior State	No Belief That p	Belief That p
Row 1) No Belief That p	Resist Belief That p	Acquire Belief That p
Row 2) Belief That p	Withdraw Belief That p	Maintain Belief That p

1.2.4 Negative Control.

The last dimension of control that needs to be considered is that of negative belief control as indicated by Row 2 of Table 1. What negative belief control identifies is an agent's move from believing a proposition to not believing a proposition. This control category is determined to be negative because it accompanies a reduction in the total beliefs in an agent's

³⁵ Rott, Hans. "Negative Doxastic Voluntarism and the concept of belief." *Synthese* 194, no. 8 (2017): 2695-2720. Pg. 2697.

belief set. Importantly, this kind of control can be construed in two ways. Firstly, we may move from believing that *p* at *t*₁ to not believing that *p* at *t*₂ indicating a removal of a belief. Similarly, we may move from believing that *p* at *t*₁ to also believing that *p* at *t*₂ thus indicating that we have maintained a belief. This second form of Negative Doxastic Control is *negative* in the sense that we have made the decision to not update our total belief set.

What this thesis will show is that there is a disanalogy between the control demonstrated between the positive and negative formulations and that, while it can be conceded that we do not possess a positive control over our beliefs in most circumstances, we do in fact regularly command a negative form of control.³⁶ In the next section I highlight how we can come to array our beliefs and our control over them in order to meet the conditions called for by voluntarist doxastic agency.³⁷

1.3 What Counts as Doxastic Agency?

1.3.1 Voluntarist Conception

In his 1983 paper “Doxastic Agency” John Heil posed the question of whether believing could be properly construed as a species of acting?³⁸ To be answered in the affirmative, Heil contended that believing and acting need to be shown to be more or less analogous in terms of an agent’s ability to exert intentional control over these functions. For actions to be a function of agency, the ‘standard theory’ asks us to consider the causal relationship between mental states or attitudes (desires or intentions for example) and wilfully performed events (such as movements).³⁹ If such a relationship exists between a person’s intention, such as the intention to raise your right arm, and an event, the raising of your right arm, then the action of arm-raising can be considered broadly as an expression of agency.

³⁶ This kind of control is somewhat indicated by the Spinozan hypothesis which suggests that individuals can arrive at a belief far more automatically than they can remove a belief.

³⁷ I do not mean to claim here that I use the word “negative” to mean the ability to suspend believing a new belief. I mean rather the ability that we have to relinquish our belief in a proposition after we have already believed it.

³⁸ Heil, John. "Doxastic agency." *Philosophical Studies* 43, no. 3 (1983): 355-364. Pg. 355.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Pg. 356.

Therefore, when a person's actions are antecedently caused by some particular array of her mental attitudes, the agent is self-governing, the full expression of which being evidenced when an agent performs the actions that most closely align with "her plans and self-governing policies."⁴⁰ By these lights, for us to be able to construe believing as a kind of acting some measure of this self-governingness must be available between the intention to control a belief and a correspondingly controlled belief. Flowerree (2017) sets out the main condition called for by this conception in a schematic form: "For any ϕ , S is an agent with respect to ϕ only if S can ϕ directly on the basis of an intention."^{41,42}

1.3.2 Agential Constraints

It is however, a well-argued position in contemporary literature to consider this analogy between belief and action on the basis of intentional control as unsuccessful. This conclusion is due in large part to the resolution that the necessary standards of agency called for by the voluntarist conception are left unmet by belief. Indeed, "it is almost universally denied that volition plays any direct role in forming or sustaining our beliefs."⁴³ To this effect, authors have cited an Asymmetry Thesis (AT hereafter) which asserts that "Belief, unlike action, is not—not directly—under our voluntary control." Therefore "belief and action are 'asymmetrical' with respect to direct voluntary control."⁴⁴ This AT turns on the axiomatic

⁴⁰ Paul, Sarah K. "The courage of conviction." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 45, no. 5-6 (2015): 647-669. Pg. 647.

⁴¹ Flowerree, A. K. "Agency of belief and intention." *Synthese* 194, no. 8 (2017): 2763-2784. Pg. 2765.

⁴² For some however, agency is best conceptualised in relation to a 'rationalising explanation'. This conception of agency argues that when a person performs an action, that action can be attributed to the agency of the person if dynamic reasons can be provided which reveal the "favourable light in which the agent saw his projected action" (McDowell 1998, Pg. 79). For an action to be agential within this context the reasons provided must to some degree help others and the actor herself to make sense of why a particular action was performed. These reasons 'rationalize an action only if it leads us to see something the agent saw, or thought he saw, in his action some feature, consequence, or aspect of the action the agent wanted, desired, prized, held dear, thought dutiful, beneficial, obligatory, or agreeable' (Davidson 1963, Pg. 687).

Proponents of this conception of agency argue that for beliefs to be considered a type of acting there must be a way of "believing for reasons we would relate to our beliefs in the same way we relate to our intentional actions: by a species of rational causation" (Setiya 2013, Pg. 190). Again we can turn to Flowerree (2017, Pg. 2771) for a schematic articulation of this conception: "For any ϕ , it is necessary that ϕ -ing have dynamic structure in order to be meaningfully understood as agential." I, however, for lack of space must leave satisfying the standards of this conception for another time.

⁴³ Paul, Sarah K. "The courage of conviction." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 45, no. 5-6 (2015): 647-669. Pg. 648.

⁴⁴ Montmarquet, James. "The voluntariness of belief." *Analysis* 46, no. 1 (1986): 49-53. Pg. 49

claim that because “it is impossible (or extremely rare) for S to believe directly on the basis of an intention. Thus, S cannot be an agent with respect to believing.”⁴⁵ The conclusion being that, while we may have agency over certain aspects of our mental life, we do not have agency over our beliefs.

1.3.3 Positive Volitional Rejections of Voluntarist Doxastic Agency

Rejections of intentional doxastic agency come in many forms, but of this multiplicity, two formulations have maintained prominence. The first of these to be considered is the empirical defence of involuntarism.

Empirical Involuntarism - This thesis asserts that a belief-forming event resulting from an agent’s intention is empirically impossible. The argument takes the following simple form:

I shall merely contend that we are not so constituted as to be able to take up propositional attitudes at will. My argument for this, if it can be called that, simply consists in asking you to consider whether you have any such powers. If I were to set out to bring myself into a state of belief that p, just by an act of will, I might assert that p with an expression of conviction or dwell favourably on the idea that p, or imagine a sentence expressing p emblazoned in the heavens with an angelic chorus in the background intoning the Kyrie of Mozart’s Coronation Mass. All this I can do at will, but none of this amounts to taking a belief that p.⁴⁶

Conceptual Involuntarism - This thesis holds that to answer the question of whether to believe p we must at the same time answer the question of whether p is true. The argument has been concisely formulated like this:

⁴⁵ Flowerree, A. K. "Agency of belief and intention." *Synthese* 194, no. 8 (2017): 2763-2784. Pg. 2765.

⁴⁶ Alston, William P. *Epistemic justification: Essays in the theory of knowledge*. Cornell University Press, 1989. Pg. 122-123.

The deliberative question whether to believe that p inevitably gives way to the factual question of whether p, because the answer to the latter question will determine the answer to the former. That is, the only way to answer the question whether to believe that p is to answer whether p.⁴⁷

This account of doxastic control thus offers a conceptual constraint on the control of our beliefs because ‘agents engaged in such deliberation can’t conclude their deliberation in a belief that p except by determining whether p.’⁴⁸

1.3.3.1 Classification:

I classify these two rejections of doxastic agency as positive and volitional because they focus both on belief acquisition and volitional control. This will be expanded upon in the following chapters.

1.4 Thesis.

The empirical and conceptual defences of involuntarism purport to rule out the concept of doxastic agency on the basis that we cannot intentionally control our beliefs, I will argue to the contrary that they are not successful in this endeavour. I make this argument on the grounds that both of these defences only consider belief control in its positive thesis and are thus susceptible to counterexamples which approach belief control from a negative perspective. For this reason, I offer the argument that agents possess a Negative Doxastic Control over the beliefs they wish to change or continue on with and that Negative Doxastic Control stands as a plausible conceptual option to be entered into the doxastic agency debate.

⁴⁷ Shah, Nishi, and J. David Velleman. "Doxastic deliberation." *The Philosophical Review* 114, no. 4 (2005): 497-534. Pg. 499.

⁴⁸ Howard, Christopher. "Transparency and the ethics of belief." *Philosophical Studies* 173, no. 5 (2016): 1191-1201. Pg. 1192. The author’s point however, is based on the work found in Shah, Nishi. "How truth governs belief." *The Philosophical Review* 112, no. 4 (2003): 447-482.

Before I begin, I close this chapter with an outline of my methodology and a consideration of the assumptions and limitations of this thesis.

1.4.1 Methodology

Because a central goal of this thesis is a widening of the conceptual landscape of doxastic practices, the question of how this primary objective will be met will be initially informed by the two precepts of intuitive argument and conceptual analysis. Particularly, this project will show that by focusing on the problem of doxastic agency from a different conceptual vantage point - that of negative doxastic agency - our understanding of our doxastic agency will be broadened. So, with regard to traditional epistemology's concern with the search for necessary and sufficient conditions for analytical arguments and its aim at providing conceptual understanding of particular epistemic phenomenon⁴⁹ the methodology of this thesis was initially placed within its scope. Moreover, because this thesis seeks initially to make claims about the conceptual nature of belief-forming practices and to broaden the understanding of agential control over these processes, it follows that traditional epistemology offers a helpful methodology.

While the conceptual investigation of this thesis will benefit from the incorporation of a traditional epistemological methodology, trouble arises with the exclusive use of this methodology if and when intuited facts come into conflict with reflective or empirical observations. Traditional epistemology's limitations are consequently borne out of an all too inward focus and a disinterest with empirical investigation in favour of intuitive reasoning. Taken in this, its received form, traditional epistemology cannot by itself provide an adequate basis for this thesis to reach its intended objectives because it is not, at its core, continuous with empirical information. It is an important article of consistent methodology that if, in the course of conducting research, inconsistency arises between intuited understandings and empirical facts, intuitions ought to be revised. So, within this sense of revision, traditional

⁴⁹ Crumley II, Jack S. *An introduction to epistemology*. Broadview Press, 2009.

epistemology generally and the direction of this research in particular will be improved by a sensitivity to reflective practices and available empirical data, and as a result, become more naturalised.

By considering the role of empirical information in epistemology, what becomes clear is that the epistemic work, and the accuracy thereof, required for this thesis to make rational and well-informed arguments about the nature of belief-forming practices cannot be tasked to traditional epistemology alone. So while this thesis will not collect empirical data, empirical data will offer constraints on my arguments. At second pass then, the research methodology of this thesis will be informed by epistemic naturalism.

There is, however, an important limitation to consider here as well. While naturalised epistemology offers a valuable guiding principle, a strict reading of it may prove overly restrictive.⁵⁰ Feldman (2011) frames this point well,

there are debates about whether knowledge and justification require conclusive reasons or merely very strong reasons, whether they require reasons at all rather than mere reliability or causal connectedness, whether the fact that a belief provides a good explanation of some data, or is natural, or is widely accepted provide epistemic support for that belief. It is not clear that empirical studies of how we actually reason help with these debates.⁵¹

To avoid the restrictive tendencies of naturalism and the over-conceptualisation of traditional epistemology, this project follows Feldman's (2011)⁵² amenable cooperative naturalism; a position which asserts the importance of conceptual analysis to the foundations of epistemic evaluation while agreeing that empirical information from the cognitive sciences

⁵⁰ Feldman, R., 2017. Methodological naturalism in epistemology. *The Blackwell guide to epistemology*, pp.170-186.

⁵¹ Feldman, Richard. "Naturalized epistemology." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2011). <https://stanford.library.sydney.edu.au/archives/win2011/entries/epistemology-naturalized/>

⁵² *Ibid.*

is indispensable for the progression of evaluative investigations. Similarly, Goldman⁵³ and Levin⁵⁴ have highlighted that the so-called “armchair” philosophical practices of conceptual analysis and a priori discovery, rather than being ineffectual or abjectly deferential to empirical investigation, ought naturally to be the first step of any epistemological investigation. This is a position shared by this research project.

Because of the uncertainty highlighted by Feldman surrounding the proper normative domains of epistemic phenomena, the cooperative naturalist methodology proposed by this research aims towards a reflective equilibrium between traditional epistemology (with its focus on conceptual analysis) and naturalist epistemology (with its insistence on the value of empirical knowledge) by constraining conceptual investigation within the influence of empirical information. Moreover, while aspects of the traditional and naturalist methodologies will prove beneficial to this research project, they have both been shown as inadequate to ground the objectives of this research on their own. In a reflective and cooperative combination however, they prove appropriate for this project.

1.5 Assumptions and Limitations.

1.5.1 Free Will vs Determinism

An important conceptual limitation for this thesis comes from the fact that any talk of agency and choice can lend itself to discussion of free will and determinism. If one is to take a deterministic position for example, which asserts that the physical realm within which our actions and choices occur is bound up by causal determination, then the question of whether or not we can actually voluntarily *choose* anything becomes significant. If the events, actions, decisions and choices that seem to be under an individual’s control are in fact necessitated by historical events, then the central aim of this thesis to illuminate the features of our intentional

⁵³ Goldman, Alvin I. "A priori warrant and naturalistic epistemology: The seventh philosophical perspectives lecture." *Noûs* 33 (1999): 1-28. Pg. 26 and Goldman, Alvin. "Kornblith's naturalistic epistemology." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 71, no. 2 (2005): 403-410. Pg. 408.

⁵⁴ Levin, Janet. "Armchair methodology and epistemological naturalism." *Synthese* 190, no. 18 (2013): 4117-4136.

control over our beliefs may seem superfluous. While this is an important criticism to consider, this thesis will not directly discuss the determinist debate. Rather, in keeping with the methodology of this project, which holds the conceptual and empirical in a reflective equilibrium, this thesis assumes the view that determinism is true but that it is compatible with the “freely willed actions [that] issue from volitional features of agency.”⁵⁵

This compatibilist view, which has been similarly advanced by Dennet⁵⁶ and Nozick⁵⁷ agrees that freedom of choice is in some sense a prerequisite for the freedom of action but seeks to demonstrate that causal determination and the freedom required to make intentional choices need not be mutually exclusive. Compatibilism therefore asserts that if an agent can come to a decision uninhibited by psychological conditions, such as hallucination or manipulation for example, the decision can be considered free while still being constrained within the realities of antecedent causes. To this end, this project does not seek to establish whether or not determinism is true but rather aims to identify whether there is a conceptually viable notion of intentional belief control given the restrictions imposed by our physical and mental faculties. Within this context, this research project sidesteps the teeth of the determinism debate whilst still acknowledging its constraining features.

1.5.2 Doxastic Responsibility

Whilst designing this project I came to the realisation that the size constraints on my thesis posed an important structural limitation to the type of arguments that I could make successfully. To this end, I acknowledged that the 20,000-word limit of the Master of Research would not allow me to forcefully argue for both a conception of control and responsibility. Although I believe that there is a strong link between our control and the kind of responsibility that we should have for our beliefs, due to the constraints on size for this

⁵⁵ McKenna, Michael and Coates, D. Justin, "Compatibilism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/compatibilism/>.

⁵⁶ Dennett, Daniel C. *Elbow room: The varieties of free will worth wanting*. MIT Press, 2015.

⁵⁷ Nozick, Robert. *Philosophical explanations*. Harvard University Press, 1981.

project, I decided that it was important to limit my arguments to addressing only one side of this equation. Some may criticise this as only answering half the question or only responding to half the data. These criticisms, I think, are correct, but when constructing my project, and determining my focus, I decided that given the state of the current debate, more work is needed to properly construct the ground floor and consequently more focus on belief control is required. In my future work, however, I hope to address both.

Concomitant to this limitation, I agree with McCormick's (2014) conclusion that the literature on doxastic voluntarism has expanded greatly within the past two decades or so.⁵⁸ This expansion will inevitably lead to this thesis discounting prominent arguments. Because of this, I direct my thesis solely at the arguments which attest to the viability of intentional believing. While it is sub-optimal to leave some arguments off the table, I take it as a more beneficial tactic to be selective rather than exhaustive.

⁵⁸ McCormick, Miriam. *Believing against the evidence: Agency and the ethics of belief*. Routledge, 2014. Preface. Pg. XII.

Chapter 2 - The Empirical Defence of Involuntarism

2.1 Introduction

As highlighted above, the voluntarist conception of doxastic agency faces serious challenges. In the coming chapter I analyse the first of the two major defences of involuntarism, namely the empirical defence. The empirical defence takes aim at the idea that beliefs can be properly causally determined by intentions. Indeed, the conclusion stands that we lack voluntary control over our propositional attitudes because we cannot believe intentionally, and we cannot believe intentionally because our will is not causally connected to belief formation. Belief does not fit this model because it is psychologically impossible for us to acquire a particular propositional attitude by way of carrying out the intention to acquire it, because our beliefs are governed by passive processes. Proponents of this view take this claim to be a contingent empirical fact.

Following this presentation, I will discuss the standard intermediate responses to this view located in the literature. These responses, I submit, generally follow Feldman's schema for criticising the empirical involuntarist's view, being that "(i) they can argue that we do have the requisite sort of control over our beliefs," or "(ii) they can argue that deontological judgments do not have voluntarist implications."⁵⁹ In the former formulation, I will examine voluntarist replies and, to the latter formulation, I will examine compatibilist responses. After sketching these responses in some detail, I will show why they are insufficient for the purposes of grounding intentional doxastic agency.

From here, I present my main issue with the empirical defence of involuntarism, namely that it approaches the concept of causal intentionality solely from the perspective of belief acquisition, and as such, when viewed within the context of current empirical results from the cognitive sciences, has very little to add to robust discussions of whether causal

⁵⁹ Feldman, Richard. "Voluntary belief and epistemic evaluation." *Knowledge, truth, and duty: Essays on epistemic justification, responsibility, and virtue* (2001): 77-92. Pg. 79.

intentionality can be grounded by investigations of abortive forms of doxastic control. This then constitutes my destructive thesis: that the current conceptual assumptions concerning doxastic agency have focused too narrowly on belief acquisition.

Lastly, I will consider the objection that abortive forms of control do not actually yield a unique form of doxastic control at all. Rather, Negative Doxastic Control can be convincingly subsumed under the evidentialist's theory. Against this objection I raise an ameliorative solution, that Negative Doxastic Control is not directed at being an entirely new conception but rather is directed at more fully fleshing out the existing dimensions of doxastic agency.

2.2 Empirical Doxastic Involuntarism

The most influential and vigorous example of the empirical argument against intentional doxastic voluntarism has been presented by Alston (1988).⁶⁰ Alston's main contention is that beliefs are psychologically disconnected from an agent's intentions and thus we cannot believe at will. Firstly, I will present how Alston develops his arguments for what counts as direct control over beliefs and then I will consider how Alston applies this framework in his attempt to dismantle the possibility of believing as a direct result of our intention to believe.

2.2.1 Classic Account

It is an appreciable characteristic of statements like; "what a weird thing to believe" that they, even unintentionally, carry some kind of moral judgment about the quality of the belief in question. The issue at hand for epistemological inquiry is to make sense of these judgements. If these statements are, for example, aimed at the beliefs themselves, what is it that the belief failed to achieve that is worthy of such criticism? On many accounts, the

⁶⁰ Alston, William P. "The deontological conception of epistemic justification." *Philosophical perspectives* 2 (1988): 257-299.

apportioning of blame is motivated by an appreciation of the control that the agent possessed over what they did or purport to do in the future. We think, for example, that making openly derogatory statements to other people is blameworthy, but if we know or come to know that the person making such statements suffers from Tourette's Syndrome, the blame we may have levelled seems to be misplaced. There are similar issues that arise when we consider the realm of beliefs. How can it be that agents can be held responsible for "bad" beliefs if they possessed no control over their beliefs in the first place? We might think of the problem, following McCormick and others, like this:

(P1) If attributions of responsibility for beliefs are appropriate, then people have voluntary control over their beliefs.

(P2) People do not have voluntary control over their beliefs.

(C) Attributions of responsibility about beliefs are not appropriate.⁶¹

On this account, P2 becomes the necessary condition for obtaining conclusions about the applicability of doxastic responsibility. Against this backdrop, most opponents of doxastic voluntarism argue that it is impossible to voluntarily control what we believe. Indeed, in our everyday experiences there appear to be obvious cases when our beliefs are not under our intentional control. It does not seem possible that there are intentional decisions that I could now make which would bring about the belief that I am right now sitting in Katz's Deli in New York, when I am not.

Alston's arguments for the empirical impossibility of believing at will picks up on the strong intuitive appeal of examples such as these and consequently he endorses both P1 and P2. The foundation of Alston's arguments turns on his acceptance of the ought-implies-can principle, so he accepts P1, and argues for P2 on the grounds that beliefs just don't seem like they change in light of decisions to change them. Alston's endorsement of P2 rests principally

⁶¹ McCormick, Miriam. "Taking control of belief." *Philosophical Explorations* 14, no. 2 (2011): 169-183. Pg. 170.

on the contention that the intentional voluntary control of beliefs is predicated on an agent's will being causally effective.⁶² What this effectiveness amounts to is the claim that, for an agent to execute the decision to believe a particular proposition, the agent must be able to enact the intention to believe that proposition. Alston's conclusion is that, in regards to our belief formation, we have no such ability. Within this context, we can set out Alston's argument against wilful control of our beliefs taxonomically; (i) the intentional control of beliefs entails that agent's possess the causal effectiveness to acquire a belief based on a decision to do so, (ii) no such causal power exists, therefore, (iii) we cannot believe directly as a result of our intentions.

Instead, Alston argues that it is evidence which determines our beliefs. So much so that, in a broad sense, Alston's position is that we cannot believe a proposition that we have clear evidence against and likewise we cannot disbelieve a proposition for which we have clear evidence in favour. To this point, Alston asks us to consider the two following questions:

“Can you switch propositional attitudes toward [the] proposition [that you have hands] just by deciding to do so?”⁶³

And.

“Can you, at this moment, start to believe that the U. S. is still a colony of Great Britain, just by deciding to do so?”⁶⁴

⁶² Steup, Matthias. "Doxastic voluntarism and epistemic deontology." *Acta Analytica* 24 (2000): 25-56. Pg. 26-27.

⁶³ Alston, William P. *Beyond "justification": Dimensions of epistemic evaluation*. Cornell University Press, 2005. Pg. 63.

⁶⁴ Alston, William P. "The deontological conception of epistemic justification." *Philosophical perspectives* 2 (1988): 257-299. Pg. 263.

Alston's answer to the question of whether we can decide to change our belief because we decide to do so is invariably 'no'. He writes:

It seems clear to me that I have no such power. Volitions, decisions, or choosings don't hook up with anything in the way of propositional attitude inauguration, just as they don't hook up with the secretion of gastric juices or cell metabolism.⁶⁵

In each case, the evidence permits of no other doxastic options. We cannot, having sufficient evidence to the contrary, simply change our belief in either example. The conclusion being that, just as we do not make causally effective decisions whether or not our cells will metabolise or whether we will secrete gastric juices, we are empirically incapable of directly controlling our beliefs based on the intention to do so.

While Alston's arguments are critical of intentional doxastic voluntarism in its direct form, he makes some important qualifications which bear highlighting in order to appreciate the full scope of his position. Alston's main contention is that direct voluntary control - the ability for an agent to control her ϕ -ing via direct application of her will - is unavailable to individuals, however this is not the only type of control that the author investigates. Indeed, in addition to his comparison of direct control and no control - wherein the agent cannot control her ϕ -ing at all, Alston argues that agents are capable of indirect voluntary control - whereby an agent controls what she ϕ s as a consequence of some intermediate step. It is the case for indirect voluntary control that the agent has direct voluntary control over something other than the ϕ itself, and by executing that direct control brings about a ϕ . Alston here asserts that we "have voluntary control over whether to keep looking for evidence or reasons, and voluntary control over where to look and what steps to take."⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Alston, William P. *Epistemic justification: Essays in the theory of knowledge*. Cornell University Press, 1989. Pg. 122.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Pg. 130.

It seems that there is much to agree with in the phenomenological conclusions of Alston's argument. What an agent succeeds in believing when there exists incontrovertible confirming evidence certainly appears to be wholly involuntary. Indeed, a plethora of such examples could be constructed which would all buttress Alston's point. I agree that it would be a case of delusion, self-deception or some other kind of cognitive acrobatics which would permit believing against the evidence cited in these cases.

Here I conclude my recapitulation of Alston's main contentions. What follows is an examination of some of the most prominent replies that have aimed at determining how successful the empirical argument is in defending its claim that the intentional control of beliefs is contingently impossible.

2.2.2 Intermediate Replies

As highlighted above, the first of the two current options available to those who wish to criticize the empirical defence of involuntarism is to argue in favour of intentional control. The first response I will investigate comes from those who argue that we can in fact control our beliefs intentionally and thus deny P2.

Any contemporary voluntarist will accept that we cannot control all our beliefs in the same way that we can raise our hands or envisage the Sydney Opera House. However, the reasonable voluntarist will ask, is it the case that no belief can possibly result directly from a decision; is it really empirically impossible to decide to believe? Of the recent literature the two major defences of this voluntarist position are advanced by Ginet (2001)⁶⁷ and by Weatherson (2008).⁶⁸ Firstly, Weatherson (2008) investigates the individual characteristics that are at play when taking control of beliefs. As he argues, in many cases individuals make errors when coming to believe certain propositions and form false beliefs as a result. In the majority of these instances these errors are unavoidable, however, according to Weatherson,

⁶⁷ Ginet, Carl. "Deciding to believe." *Knowledge, truth, and duty*(2001): 63-76.

⁶⁸ Weatherson, Brian. "Deontology and descartes's demon." *The Journal of Philosophy* 105, no. 9 (2008): 540-569.

in some cases we could have sidestepped these mistakes by being more epistemically skilful. If we consider two examples of when (i) an agent too hastily discounts a realistic hypothesis, or (ii) when an agent accords too high a regard for an unrealistic hypothesis, Weatherson claims that because the agent could have done otherwise: being that she could have formed her beliefs more skilfully, she exerts a voluntary control over at least some of her beliefs. Weatherson considers the following as being emblematic of this kind of control:

Mark is writing out the shopping list for the weekly grocery shop. He goes to the fridge and sees that there is a carton of orange juice in the fridge. He forms the belief that there is orange juice in the fridge, and hence that he does not need to buy orange juice. As it turns out both of these beliefs are false. One of his housemates finishes off the orange juice, but stupidly put the empty carton back in the fridge. When Mark finds this out, he is irritated at his housemate, but he is also irritated at himself. He did not have to draw the conclusion that there was orange juice in the fridge. He was, after all, living in a student house where people do all sorts of dumb things.⁶⁹

Along similar lines, Ginet's proposal is to claim that our everyday lives are awash with situations where we seem to bring our will directly to bear on what we believe. When, for example, an individual deliberates over believing p or $\neg p$ with inconclusive evidence for either proposition, if that individual then believes one proposition over the other, Ginet asserts that the individual maintains an observable ability for "coming to believe something just by deciding to do so."⁷⁰ To illustrate this kind of voluntarist position, Ginet proposes the following example:

Sam is on a jury deliberating whether to find the defendant guilty as charged; if certain statements of a certain witness in the trial are true, then the defendant cannot have done

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, Pg. 549.

⁷⁰ Ginet, Carl. "Deciding to believe." *Knowledge, truth, and duty*(2001): 63-76. Pg. 63.

what he is charged with; Sam deliberates whether to believe those statements, to believe the prosecutor's insinuations that the witness lied, or to withhold belief on the matter altogether. He decides to believe the witness and votes to acquit.⁷¹

The second manner by which authors have examined the validity of the empirical defence of involuntarism has been to consider the voluntarist implications of deontological ascriptions of responsibility. For many, Alston's argument rules out more than they would deem acceptable and so these authors have sought to define a compatibilist approach to doxastic responsibility which obtains a moderate form of doxastic control.⁷²

This type of compatibilism, which we can call compatibilism with control, attempts to deny P1 by redefining the type of control that is called for by assertions of doxastic responsibility. According to this argument, voluntary forms of control are not necessary for responsibility. Rather, what is required to make rational claims of doxastic responsibility is that agents possess a control approximating a responsiveness to reasons. These compatibilists then assert that while we do not possess direct voluntary control over our beliefs, we do in fact have a reason-responsiveness form of control and consequently have obligations associated with our beliefs. While there is no univocal structure to this position, of these arguments which propound compatibilism's applicability, there is a common thought that the compatibilist holds; that we exercise control even though we are determined to assent to a particular belief.⁷³

One obvious question that arises from the compatibilist's approach is to ask, what exactly does doxastic compatibilist control amount to? A number of schemes have been adapted to answer this question, but of these, there exists two prominent accounts. Firstly, Heller (2000)⁷⁴ asserts that there exists a kind of intrapersonal relationship between our

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, Pg. 64.

⁷² Peels, Rik. "Against doxastic compatibilism." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 89, no. 3 (2014): 679-702. In this article the author gives an excellent overview of the literature on compatibilism.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, Pg. 681.

⁷⁴ Heller, Mark. "Hobartian Voluntarism: Grounding a Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (2000): 130-141.

beliefs and our epistemic nature. Our epistemic nature, according to Heller, is manifested by our willingness to form beliefs which accord with our own personal dispositions. As such, Heller makes the claim that we can “disentangle”⁷⁵ our current concept of voluntary control and supplant it with a “compatibilistic conception of control”⁷⁶ based on this epistemic nature. Our doxastic responsibility then follows from the fact that our beliefs, properly conceived, are representations of who we are.⁷⁷

A different and perhaps more influential version of compatibilism with control is presented by Ryan (2003).⁷⁸ Broadly, on Ryan’s summation, what doxastic responsibility requires is that individuals be able to acknowledge evidence and consequently form beliefs accordingly. From here, Ryan’s argument, contra Alston, analogises beliefs with actions insofar as the motivations for both are in many respects the same. Just as our actions to call someone on the phone or go for a jog are sometimes susceptible to being responsive to reasons so too are our beliefs. However, even though we may be held responsible for the actions and beliefs which are formed in this way, it does not follow, for Ryan, that their formation required a specific intention to do so. Ryan concludes that intentional doxastic control is superfluous to our justifications for holding people responsible for their beliefs. Ryan’s project is well captured in the following:

I cannot now, given my current evidence, just believe the population of the United States exceeds that of China. That’s right. Does that fact show that my belief is not under my control or voluntary or free? Not at all, and this can be seen by considering other actions one would regard as free. There are plenty of things I cannot “just do”. Suppose I am driving down the road and I see a mother and her child walking down the road. I see them and ask myself, “should I run them over?” I immediately and freely decide not to and then freely drive on. In fact, in a very important sense, I just can’t do something like that.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, Pg. 130.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, Pg. 132-137.

⁷⁸ Ryan, Sharon. "Doxastic compatibilism and the ethics of belief." *Philosophical Studies* 114, no. 1-2 (2003): 47-79.

. . Does this show that I did not freely decide not to run over the mother and child? Of course not.⁷⁹

2.3 Limitations

The preceding has been a reflection of both the classic account of the empirical argument against intentional doxastic voluntarism and the replies which critically reflect upon its success. What follows is a presentation of the limitations of the current responses to the empirical defence of involuntarism.

In the first instance, there seems to be a strong intuitive motivation to accept Ginet's conclusion that Sam indeed intentionally decided to believe the proposition that the testimony presented by the witness was truthful. However, when Ginet's project is investigated a little deeper, what becomes apparent is that intention does not play all that clear of a role in Sam's decision to believe the witness. Conceivably, throughout the process of Sam's deliberations, there came a time when the evidence for the truth of the proposition that the witness was truthful became significant enough to warrant Sam's belief. Indeed, Nottelmann (2006)⁸⁰ suggests that the only thing that was actually up to Sam's decision-making abilities was whether or not to continue his deliberations. Alston's own arguments acknowledge that this kind of indirect control can be voluntary so to pin conclusions which portend to dissolve the empirical arguments against intentional voluntarism to control which only amounts to indirect control does not seem fruitful. Nottelmann makes the point well here:

what was entirely outside of his [Sam's] control was the empirical psychological fact that his belief that he had good and sufficient epistemic reasons to believe that p induced in him the belief that p.⁸¹

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Pg. 63.

⁸⁰ Nottelmann, Nikolaj. "The analogy argument for doxastic voluntarism." *Philosophical Studies* 131, no. 3 (2006): 559-582.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, Pg. 573.

Similarly, Weatherson's claim has received pointed criticism. Above all however, what is important for our purposes is that Weatherson's conclusion has been properly conceived as one of indirect voluntarism rather than direct.⁸²

In the second instance, the compatibilist with control position seems equally insufficient for dismantling Alston's empirical defence. Firstly, for Heller, the control associated with the agent's believing seems to be exhibited in the process leading up to the belief which hints at an indirect rather than direct account of believing. According to Heller's arguments, it does not seem to be the case that the agent can directly call the belief into being, rather the agent controls the antecedent conditions which enables her to come to a belief.

Additionally, Ryan's doxastic compatibilist theory does not seem fit for the purposes of demonstrating direct voluntary control over believing. What we can plausibly take away from Ryan's example is that there are cases in which actions are just like beliefs, in that they cannot be performed at will. Since we think of these actions as voluntary, we should think of beliefs as voluntary too. While this is accurate, Ryan's conclusions do not arrive at the sort of direct control via intentions that is sought by this project.

2.3.1 Destructive Thesis

The empirical rejection of intentional doxastic control is well constructed and the examples which support its conclusions are forceful. However, as the forthcoming section will highlight, focusing on the positive thesis of belief control actually reveals very little about our intentional doxastic agency when we consider this argument against a myriad of empirical findings from the cognitive sciences.⁸³

Wegner et al. (1985) for example, demonstrated that even after briefing their test subjects that the feedback that they would receive during an upcoming experiment was

⁸² Côté-Bouchard, Charles. "'Ought' implies 'can' against epistemic deontologism: beyond doxastic involuntarism." *Synthese* (2017): 1-16. The author makes this point well.

⁸³ I must here acknowledge Neil Levy and especially his paper Levy, Neil, and Eric Mandelbaum. "The powers that bind: Doxastic voluntarism and epistemic obligation." *The Ethics of Belief, Oxford, OUP* (2014): 15-32 for bringing this sort of argument to my attention.

incorrect, the test subjects incorporated the feedback into their beliefs and judgements as if it was real. These test subjects were almost entirely disinclined to reject the false information even after being forewarned of its dubiousness.⁸⁴

Similarly, Gerrig (1991) looked at how individuals encode information from obviously fake sources. What these researchers identified was that even when information was collected from sources that were clearly fictional, this information “penetrates into judgments about beliefs” and leads individuals to “create hybrid representations of fictional information.”⁸⁵

Lastly, we can also observe the results of Gilbert et al (1993) who demonstrated that individuals are in many respects incapable of being wholly sceptical towards new information. Their experiment focused on placing subjects under both time and cognitive load pressures while reading false information. Again, subjects were unable to resist affirming the received information and fashioning associated beliefs, even though the information was spurious.⁸⁶

What this evidence suggests, I claim, is that when it comes to believing, people are inclined to believe propositions far more readily than they are to change their beliefs. So much so that some have contended that “believing is so easy, and perhaps so inevitable, that it may be more like involuntary comprehension than it is like rational assessment.”⁸⁷ In this light, we can re-examine Alston’s argument that intentional decisions do not attend “propositional attitude inauguration”⁸⁸ with this argument now appearing to be true but somewhat inconsequential. Indeed, there appears to never really be a decision to be made whether or not we will come to believe a proposition. A genuinely substantial conception of

⁸⁴ Wegner, Daniel M., Gary F. Coulton, and Richard Wenzlaff. "The transparency of denial: Briefing in the debriefing paradigm." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 49, no. 2 (1985).

⁸⁵ Gerrig, Richard J., and Deborah A. Prentice. "The representation of fictional information." *Psychological Science* 2, no. 5 (1991): 336-340. Pg. 336.

⁸⁶ Gilbert, Daniel T., Romin W. Tafarodi, and Patrick S. Malone. "You can't not believe everything you read." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 65, no. 2 (1993): 221.

⁸⁷ Gilbert, Daniel T. "How mental systems believe." *American psychologist* 46, no. 2 (1991): 107-119. Pg. 117.

⁸⁸ Alston, William P. *Epistemic justification: Essays in the theory of knowledge*. Cornell University Press, 1989. Pg. 122.

doxastic agency (as is the one advanced by this thesis) however takes it to be the case that beliefs can sometimes be under the direct voluntary control of the individual. So, while Alston's project obtains some obvious success, his conclusions do not rule out a substantive account of doxastic agency that focuses on belief removal.

Similarly, while the compatibilist accounts of doxastic control buttress reasonable forms of doxastic responsibility, they also appear insufficient for showing whether or not intentions can dictate beliefs. I readily concede the compatibilist's contention that there is a sense in which beliefs might be controlled, but I am after something additional – control by intentions. Therefore, the question of whether intentional decisions can be made concerning the relinquishing of a belief at least based on the arguments presented so far, remains open. Finally, I argue that at least *prima facie*, we should prefer an account of doxastic agency which conforms with these scientific findings, findings which indicate that conceptualising the relinquishing of beliefs may offer a more detailed account of our doxastic agency.

2.3.2 Objection and Solution

A potential objection to my line of reasoning here might be to suggest that focusing on belief removal does not in fact reveal anything unique about our doxastic agency. To this criticism I offer a brief reply.

I disagree that belief acquisition and belief removal are analogous forms of doxastic control. Firstly, voluntarism seeks to answer the question, “how is it that the agent herself – not merely some causal force acting on her – is the source of her ϕ -ing?”⁸⁹ The answer to this question turns on the requirement that the agent must have *chosen* to ϕ . Asserting that the answer to whether we can believe intentionally or not based on the automatic processes of belief acquisition therefore seems incomplete. It becomes important to note however that I do not claim that Negative Doxastic Control is an arbitrary form of control. I simply claim that it

⁸⁹ Flowerree, A. K. "Agency of belief and intention." *Synthese* 194, no. 8 (2017): 2763-2784. Pg. 2782.

is conceptually possible in a set of cases to manifest this form of control over our beliefs. I develop this argument in what follows.

2.4 Conclusion

In sum, the empirical defence of involuntarism poses an important roadblock for those who assert that we can believe based on an intention. This defence however faces some serious criticism. As we have seen, those who have wished to criticise the empirical account have so far done so by attempting to show that (i) we do in fact have voluntary control over our beliefs, at least in some instances, or that (ii) doxastic responsibility can still obtain under a modified form of control. I have shown that these replies are unsuccessful in dissolving the central claims of the empirical account; namely, that intentions are not causally determined by the will of an agent, so we cannot believe at will. I argued instead that focusing the debate about doxastic agency solely on belief acquisition proves ineffective. I claimed that the current scientific evidence suggests that we believe more or less automatically but relinquish beliefs in a far more deliberate manner. Therefore, against the empirical account, I argue in chapter 4 that we can in fact control our beliefs on the basis of an intention to do so. Specifically, the task I set before section 4.2 will be to show how removing a belief from our doxastic framework can demonstrate intentional agency.

Chapter 3 - The Conceptual Defence of Involuntarism

3.1 Introduction

While the empirical account of doxastic involuntarism directs its criticism at the individual's psychological inability to control belief, the second major critique of doxastic agency levels its criticism at the nature of belief itself. In the coming chapter I analyse the conceptual defence of involuntarism, the argument that there are important theoretical limits on the nature of belief itself which inhibit our belief-forming capacities. This argument progresses sequentially by first claiming that if it were possible for a belief to be acquired by will, it stands to reason that it could be acquired in abject disregard of its veracity. And because the truth of a belief determines its rational status as a belief, we cannot but believe propositions except for taking them to be true.⁹⁰ Firstly, I present this argument in its standard formulation.

Following this, I will present the standard intermediate responses to the conceptual account of belief control located in the literature. The first response is directed at assessing the implications of the conclusions reached via the conceptual defence and the second is aimed at the metaphysical assumptions of the standard account. After presenting these responses, I will show again why they are insufficient for the purposes of refuting the conceptual account and grounding intentional doxastic agency.

Against this background, I present my main issue with the conceptual defence of involuntarism, namely that it broadly over-idealises doxastic deliberation. From here, I suggest that, because people are often struck by sudden impulses to relinquish a reasonably held belief, understanding how beliefs act over time is imperative. This then constitutes the second utilisation of my destructive thesis: that the conceptual assumptions concerning doxastic agency found in the conceptual defence of involuntarism have focused only on cases of belief acquisition.

⁹⁰ Nottelmann, Nikolaj. *Blameworthy belief: A study in epistemic deontologism*. Vol. 338. Springer Science & Business Media, 2007. Pg. 105.

Lastly, I will consider the objection that the second formulation of Negative Doxastic Control fails to meet the standards of what actually constitutes a belief. That in fact, the beliefs controlled under the guise of Negative Doxastic Control do not amount to beliefs at all. Against this objection I raise again an ameliorative solution, that negatively controlled beliefs can in fact constitute beliefs when we apply more appropriate doxastic standards. Again, this argument is directed at more fully fleshing out the existing dimensions of doxastic agency.

3.2 The Conceptual Defence of Involuntarism

The most authoritative version of the conceptual defence of involuntarism has been presented by Williams (1973).⁹¹ According to this argument, which can be called teleological, our beliefs are governed, not by the will, but via a constitutive aim. This aim reflects a conceptual element inherent to beliefs, that when an individual deliberates and comes to the belief that p, the individual's belief that p is limited by whether it is the case that the individual's belief is taken to be true. In the first section I will give an account of how Williams constructs his claim that beliefs are conceptually constrained to aim at the truth. After this, I will present how Williams directs his argument against the claim that we can believe as the result of our intention to do so.

3.2.1 Classic Account

While the preceding chapter spelled out an understanding of involuntarism at the empirical level, some authors have argued that our inability to believe according to our will cuts far deeper than that. To this point, Bennett forcefully claims that:

⁹¹ Williams, B. A. "Deciding to believe." *Problems of the Self* (1973): 136-151.

There is indeed something so chokingly unswallowable about the idea of someone's voluntarily coming to believe something that I have to suspect that this is ruled out at a deeper level than the contingent powers of our minds.⁹²

What exists at this "deeper level" of criticism, at least for Williams, is a conceptual critique that goes to demonstrate that it is the nature of beliefs themselves that rules out our ability to believe at will. Williams scaffolds his argument through the delineation of a number of characteristics, the first, and perhaps most influential of these is the 'aim of belief', the broad claim that our control over our believing is conceptually inhibited by a belief's necessary teleological course towards the truth.⁹³

Following Anscombe (1957)⁹⁴ and later Searle's (1979)⁹⁵ claim that beliefs have a mind-to-world direction of fit, Williams' aim of belief contention is grounded by the premise that beliefs are implicitly bound to represent the world as it is. Because it seems ridiculous for an individual to make the Moorean statement that "I went to the pictures last Tuesday but I don't believe that I did,"⁹⁶ belief appears to include within itself a confirmation of the truth of its proposition. That is, belief can only exist if the holder of the belief recognizes the content of her belief to be true.⁹⁷ Following this, Williams argues that it is through assertion that beliefs are most regularly expressed. Williams' contention here is to show that for the propositions to which we can attribute our belief, implicit in our assertions of these propositions is the fact that we believe the content of what we are asserting.⁹⁸ Lastly, Williams asserts that beliefs are most commonly, but not inevitably, based on evidence and possess some form of explanatory power.⁹⁹ With these characteristics, Williams fashions the

⁹² Bennett, Jonathan. "Why is belief involuntary?" *Analysis* 50, no. 2 (1990): 87-107. Pg. 90.

⁹³ Williams, B. A. "Deciding to believe." *Problems of the Self* (1973): 136-151. Pg. 136.

⁹⁴ Anscombe, Gertrude Elizabeth Margareth. "Intention (1957)." *Cambridge, Mass* 21963 (2000).

⁹⁵ Searle, John R. "What is an intentional state?." *Mind* 88, no. 349 (1979): 74-92.

⁹⁶ Moore, George Edward. "A reply to my critics: Analysis." *The philosophy of GE Moore* (1942): 543-667. Pg. 543.

⁹⁷ Williams, B. A. "Deciding to believe." *Problems of the Self* (1973): 136-151. Pg. 137.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, Pg. 140.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, Pg. 141.

groundwork for the second half of his project, a thorough critique of the concept of believing at will.

Because Williams claims that the teleological nature of belief being aimed at truth lays antecedent to an individual's ability to will a belief into existence, it stands as a wholly impossible task to attempt to divorce beliefs from their orientation towards the truth. According to this truth-directedness, we can parse attributions of truth and falsehood to reflect the very nature of beliefs. So much so that for a belief to be taken to be false disqualifies it from the individuating status of belief. If we can believe at will, argues Williams, it also follows that we can believe arbitrarily, and if we can believe arbitrarily we are not bound to believe with respect to the veridical nature of beliefs. The essence of this portion of Williams' argument is captured well in the following:

Belief cannot be like that; it is not a contingent fact that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I believe something, as it is a contingent fact that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I'm blushing. Why is this? One reason is connected with the characteristic of beliefs that they aim at truth. If I could acquire a belief at will, I could acquire it whether it was true or not.¹⁰⁰

From this, Williams posits an extra layer of critique against believing as a result of wilful intention; an argument directed at the deliberative issues associated with the conceptual impossibility prescribed by beliefs aiming at truth. If we can believe at will, then there is a sense in which the believer would be alienated from her beliefs because, as Williams contends, "I could not then, in full consciousness, regard this as a belief of mine, i.e. something that I take to be true, and also know that I acquired it at will."¹⁰¹ There is a necessity for Williams that the deliberative question to believe that *p* is in some way transparent to the subject. That is, from before the moment the individual 'believes at will', if

¹⁰⁰ Williams, B. A. "Deciding to believe." *Problems of the Self* (1973): 136-151. Pg. 148.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

such action is to truly represent the will of the individual, the individual must be aware of what she is about to do. Additionally, following this moment, Williams contends that the individual would not be able to sincerely reflect on the supposedly willed belief and conclude that it in fact was attributable to the individual, or indeed a belief at all. We can look directly at Williams' text for how he formulates this section of his argument:

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...¹⁰²

In its totality, Williams' argument purports to dissolve the contention that we can ever believe at will because believing at will is a conceptual impossibility, ruled out by the nature of belief itself. Booth (2007) concisely summarises Williams' argument in a schematic form:

- (1) It is an essential feature of beliefs that they aim at truth.
- (2) If I can believe at will then I must, in full consciousness, know that I am able to acquire a belief irrespective of whether or not it is true.
- (3) But I could not consider what I had acquired a belief if I had acquired it in the knowledge that I did so irrespective of its truth.
- (4) Therefore, I cannot believe at will.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Williams, B. A. "Deciding to believe." *Problems of the Self* (1973): 136-151. Pg. 143.

¹⁰³ Booth, Anthony R. "Doxastic voluntarism and self-deception." *Disputatio* 2, no. 22 (2007): 1-16. Pg. 5.

Here I conclude my summary of Williams' arguments. I direct the following section at sketching some of the arguments which purport to combat Williams' conclusion that we cannot believe at will. The first reply is directed at confronting Williams' conceptual impossibility clause head on while the second is an attempt at demonstrating that the aim of truth does not necessarily disqualify believing at will.

3.2.2 Intermediate Replies

As we have seen, Williams defends the claim that it is the aim of belief that explains why it is conceptually impossible to believe at will. Due to the forcefulness of this conclusion, the subsequent debate between those who subscribe to Williams' position and those who wish to challenge it has centred on interpreting the credibility of belief's truth-aim. One particularly interesting challenge has been posed by Reisner (2013) who responds to the veracity of the aim of belief and directs his critique towards the reasonableness of the conclusions which it portends.

Reisner's principal issue is that Williams' conclusion does not necessarily follow his premise, rather, Reisner claims, there are occasions when believing at will is both possible and called for by belief's truth aim. Reisner anchors his critique on his claim that "underdetermination is the death of involuntary belief forming mechanisms."¹⁰⁴ What follows, he claims, is a kind of restricted voluntarism which takes the ensuing form:

(D1) Voluntarism: An agent can choose her belief just in case three conditions are met.

(A) Evidence does not issue a relevant requirement (either for a belief, disbelief, or suspension of judgement).

(B) The agent knows that her having the belief will cause the belief to be true.

(C) Normative knowledge does not issue a reason for just a single belief.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Reisner, Andrew. "Leaps of Knowledge." In Chan, Timothy, ed. *The aim of belief*. Oxford University Press, 2013. Pg. 172.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, Pg. 179.

Reisner presents his case logically through an analysis of single and multiple fixed-point number games which he claims demonstrates an individual's believing based on an intention to believe as "conducive to the fulfilment of the aim of truth."¹⁰⁶

Along similar lines, the second reply comes from Peels (2015)¹⁰⁷ who critically discusses Williams' conclusion that aiming at truth conceptually prevents wilful believing. Peels' response, building on condition B of the above, is that it doesn't, and after outlining the necessary conditions required to consider a belief as wilful, he motivates his summation with the following illustrative example:

Scenario #1

I am a little low on cash, so I desire to receive \$10. I consider whether I believe that Dr. Transparent will give me \$10 and am immediately introspectively aware that I do not. However, I then realize that, as soon as I believe that I will receive \$10, I will in fact receive \$10. Or, to be slightly more precise, if I acquire that belief, I will most likely receive the reward and, therefore, hold a true belief. (I say that it is most likely rather than that it is guaranteed, because Dr. Transparent may suddenly die or a fire might start in the room, forcing us to leave immediately, and so forth.) In other words, I realize that, if I come to believe that I will receive \$10, that belief will be true. After all, Dr. Transparent's mind-reading is perfectly reliable and he is an honest man who will keep his promise. Since I desire to receive \$10, I choose to believe that I will receive \$10. I realize that I hold this belief because I have chosen to acquire it; but that does not undermine my belief that I will receive \$10. All of this happens within a minute. Looking at his brain scanner, Dr. Transparent notices that I have come to believe that I will receive \$10 and he therefore gives me \$10.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Chan, Timothy. "Introduction: Aiming at truth." In Chan, Timothy, ed. *The aim of belief*. Oxford University Press, 2013: 1-16. Pg. 14.

¹⁰⁷ Peels, Rik. "Believing at will is possible." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 93, no. 3 (2015): 524-541. Pg. 529.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, Pg. 529.

Peels' argument is rather straightforward; he claims that his example is a representation of 'truth depending on belief' whereby the truth of the scenario is not antecedently knowable but rather "depends on whether or not one believes the proposition."¹⁰⁹ Because of this, Peels concludes, contra Williams' premise, that because "I first do not believe that I will receive \$10 (nor do I disbelieve it), then deliberate about whether I want to receive \$10, subsequently think that I do, and on that basis decide to believe,"¹¹⁰ believing at will is indeed conceptually possible. In the following section I present how proponents of Williams' view have responded to these arguments, and how these responses highlight some of the limitations of these critiques.

3.3 Limitations

Importantly, the abovementioned criticisms of Williams' argument turn on two significant assumptions. Firstly, their conclusions require belief to be based principally on practical reasons, and secondly, they rely on fairly contrived examples to make their case. Along these lines, Adler and Hicks (2013) critique Reisner's claims by stating that he specifies "only a narrow set of beliefs, roughly limited to contents that, as beliefs, would be personally important and that would direct significant activities or pursuits."¹¹¹ This belief set however, does not demonstrate a forceful refutation of Williams' arguments because it is far too limited. Indeed, the authors claim, that because Reisner's arguments are only applicable to a selection of cases in which how the world is depends on what the person believes, and not vice-versa, Reisner's project represents a "codification of the problem"¹¹² and that his argument "only gets what traction it has from consideration of special cases."¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Adler, Jonathan, and Michael Hicks. "Non-Evidential Reasons to Believe." *The Aim of Belief* (2013): 141-166. Pg. 164.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, Footnote (40).

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

Similarly, Peels' arguments have been met by similar claims that their hyper-specificity detracts from their ability to make forceful pronouncements. Shepherd (2018) contends that while Peels has succeeded in constructing a scenario which demonstrates the possibility of forming a belief at will, he adds the important caveat that:

Peels has given us an argument that believing at will is conceptually possible in very special circumstances. Not many prospective beliefs will be true if only we come to possess them. If we require circumstances this special in order to form rationally permitted beliefs at will, then the ability to do so would not seem very useful to agents like us.¹¹⁴

So, while these replies have some merit, their weaknesses rest on the highly unusual properties they are required to possess in order to achieve their goals. In the following section I direct my destructive thesis at Williams' conclusions while taking heed of the unpalatable abstractness of the examples offered above.

3.3.1 Destructive Thesis

The pertinent detail for my purposes in this section is that the conceptual account of involuntarism relies on belief acquisition, but more specifically, on a view of belief acquisition which is directed at an individual's present first-personal perspective. This is an issue, I argue, because reliance on such a stance makes our doxastic mechanisms vulnerable to suboptimal deliberation. This vulnerability, I contend, can be remedied by employing Negative Doxastic Control in its second formulation, wherein individuals possess an ability to intentionally decide whether they will maintain a belief over time when that belief faces challenge. This correspondingly evokes the second instantiation of my destructive thesis and

¹¹⁴ Shepherd, Joshua. "Intending, believing, and supposing at will." *Ratio* 31, no. 3 (2018): 321-330. Pg. 326.

clears space for my claim that Negative Doxastic Control in its second formulation can improve the current debate.

In defence of my first contention, that the conceptual defence of involuntarism rests on a particularly synchronic perspective, consider the following from Boyle (2011):

I do not recall what I believe about whether P unless I recall what now looks to me to be the truth as to whether P. What I call to mind must be not merely my past assessment of it, but my present assessment of it – the assessment that currently strikes me as correct.¹¹⁵

Boyle's contention is that, because of the conceptual limitations placed on believing by the truth aim of belief, we are obliged to take the present moment of deliberation as authoritative. This is because, as Paul (2015) points out;

the question 'do I believe that P?' is held to be transparent to the question 'is P true?' If the loss of transparency between belief and evidence is necessarily a rational breakdown, and especially if transparency is a conceptual constraint on treating the question of whether one believes that P deliberatively, then a rational thinker must be bound to her present perspective on her evidence.¹¹⁶

It is this notion of being 'bound to a present perspective' which seemingly rubs against a number of empirical results. If we reflect again on those who believe in a flat Earth, it seems strange to think that they, throughout their lives, have not encountered evidence which forcefully contradicts their beliefs. In fact, due to the abundance of such evidence, it seems uncontroversial to assume that they have been met with at least some disconfirming arguments and facts. Given this assumption, how can we make sense of the fact that their

¹¹⁵ Boyle, Matthew. "Making up your mind" and the activity of reason. *Philosopher's Imprint*, 11(17) (2011), 1-24. Pg. 10.

¹¹⁶ Paul, Sarah K. "The courage of conviction." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 45, no. 5-6 (2015): 647-669. Pg. 653.

beliefs persist? One method for investigating this seemingly odd occurrence has been to determine the tendency and indeed the mechanisms through which people “cling to beliefs in the face of subsequent counterevidence.”¹¹⁷ To many, it may seem strange that beliefs would persist in the face of disconfirming evidence, however this is a well-studied and replicated phenomenon.¹¹⁸ Some of the clearest cases of this phenomenon are articulated through debriefing experiments wherein subjects have their initial evidential foundations for a belief invalidated.

In their experiment, Ross, Lepper, and Hubbard (1975) set three groups of subjects the rather morbid task of determining the authenticity of a set of suicide notes. The researchers then provided false feedback to the subjects regarding their aptitude for the task. This feedback broadly consisted of falsely inflating or deflating the subject’s understanding of how well they had performed in distinguishing the false from the authentic suicide notes. Accordingly, the subjects assessed their own performance in the task based on the false feedback supplied by the researchers. In the second phase of the experiment, the first test group was informed that the feedback they had received was predetermined and did not at all reflect their aptitude for the task. The second test group, in addition to this debriefing, were informed that belief perseverance was in fact the target of the study. The third group operated as a control and were given no debriefing. Following this, the subjects were again tasked with rating their own aptitude for determining the authenticity of the suicide notes. Interestingly, the group that received debriefing did not relinquish their beliefs concerning their aptitude for the task, even upon learning that the feedback that they had received was meaningless.¹¹⁹

A similar experiment was conducted by Lord, Ross and Lepper (1979) which again showed that beliefs persevere irrespective of the presentation of potentially disconfirming

¹¹⁷ Shultz, Thomas R., Jacques A. Katz, and Mark R. Lepper. "Clinging to beliefs: A constraint-satisfaction model." In *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society*, vol. 23, no. 23. 2001.

¹¹⁸ For a great overview of the scientific literature see, Mandelbaum, Eric. "Thinking is believing." *Inquiry* 57, no. 1 (2014): 55-96.

¹¹⁹ Ross, Lee, Mark R. Lepper, and Michael Hubbard. "Perseverance in self-perception and social perception: biased attributional processes in the debriefing paradigm." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 32, no. 5 (1975): 880.

evidence. For this experiment, the researchers divided a group of subjects in half based on their opinion towards capital punishment. In the first half were those who believed that capital punishment was societally beneficial because of its ability to deter would-be criminals, in the second group were those who believed that capital punishment was not societally beneficial and denied the premise that such punishments deter criminality. Both groups were then tasked with reading and interpreting two bogus studies; one which presented statistics in support of the deterrence capacity of capital punishment and one which presented statistics supporting the opposite claim. Both groups reported that the evidence which supported their original position was credible and rated the studies which opposed their initial positions as unconvincing, even after learning that the information that they had read was false.¹²⁰

Experiments on belief perseverance show that when we consider the idea of whether p when faced with disconfirming evidence, there is a strong latent tendency to accept our previous take on whether p to settle for us our current belief, even if our current perspective is corrupted. If we are again to align our understanding of belief control with the available scientific evidence, there seems a need to develop an understanding of our doxastic control in light of our normally diachronic believing. Even though, for example, we may have thoroughly investigated and researched a particular thesis topic and come to the belief that it is indeed a worthy topic on which to write a dissertation, there will be many times throughout our subsequent writing where we will be struck by the idea that we are wrong. Maybe we have lost confidence, maybe we read a number of very high-level dissertations and assume that we will never be able to reach that level, maybe our peers don't see the value that we see in our topic. If we are to accept simply our current take on whether p in these instances it seems that we should abandon the belief that we have a robust thesis topic, even though a diachronic perspective on whether p may render a completely different response.

¹²⁰ Lord, Charles G., Lee Ross, and Mark R. Lepper. "Biased assimilation and attitude polarization: The effects of prior theories on subsequently considered evidence." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 37, no. 11 (1979).

Further to this point, to consider only our present take on whether *p* to be instructive leaves us open to sub-optimal deliberations because we lack a kind of doxastic constancy which may show an agential side of our deliberation over time. My suggestion is that we have similar need of self-control in treating our past judgments as settling the question for us of what to believe in the face of temptation to reconsider. Just as the flat Earth belief represents the irrational side of this kind of believing, the question of whether there is a rational, controlled side to this kind of deliberation and the refusal to take up a position in relation to our current take on the evidence remains open.

3.3.2 Objection and Reply

It may be argued that if we are prone to accept our past take on whether *p* in the same manner that the test subjects did, then it may seem that there is no real control available to subjects to redeliberate once a belief has been acquired. My response to this criticism is as follows.

This criticism rests on an assumption that is not carried through by the scientific literature. Although it is true that individuals have a kind of default setting which directs us towards belief perseverance, this tendency can be overcome. Counter-explanation techniques have proved successful in dissuading individuals of their discredited beliefs.¹²¹ However, as we shall see, my argument is interested in exploring how disregarding an epistemic crisis and accepting a past take on the truth of *p* can be reasonably defended.

3.4 Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, I first acknowledge that the conceptual defence of involuntarism, though robust, is not impregnable. As I have shown, a number of attempts have been made to reveal that having belief aim at truth does not necessarily rule out the

¹²¹ See Anderson, Craig A., and Elizabeth S. Sechler. "Effects of explanation and counterexplanation on the development and use of social theories." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50, no. 1 (1986): 24.

possibility that individuals can believe at will. I have also shown, however, that these responses are not as forceful as the proponents of intentional believing might hope as they rely on highly unusual cases. Because of the limitations of the current responses to the conceptual account, I offer my own; that because the conceptual account relies on deliberation about belief acquisition which favours the present first-personal perspective, it places its conclusions at odds with many empirical findings. These empirical findings assert that beliefs have a strong diachronic character and tend to persevere over time. Because of this, I suggest that Negative Doxastic Control in its second formulation - whereby an individual makes the intentional decision to maintain a formerly held belief - can have something to say in the current debates concerning doxastic agency. Therefore, against the conceptual account, I argue in chapter 4 that we can in fact control our beliefs on the basis of an intention to do so. Particularly, the task I set before section 4.3 will be to show how maintaining a belief can demonstrate intentional agency.

Chapter 4 - Belief, Agency and Negative Doxastic Control

4.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters have been focused on developing a common problematic theme which runs throughout the current discourse on intentional believing. Because the bulk of the current literature has focused on regarding doxastic agency synonymously with belief acquisition, the current debate has been detrimentally conceptually constrained. With this current direction, those who wish to make the argument that individuals are incapable of believing at will resulting either from the empirical limitations of our cognition or the conceptual nature of belief itself, seem to be staking their positions on insufficient grounds. Of the many results discussed above, the common thread is that our ability to control beliefs is unlikely to come from investigations of how individuals acquire beliefs because belief acquisitions are typically automatic. Consequently, the current literature on whether we can intentionally control the relinquishing of beliefs remains underdeveloped. The concept of doxastic agency, I argue, requires further investigation, with particular focus on the negative side of doxastic control.

In what follows, I outline two examples which I argue demonstrate intentional doxastic agency but are also commensurate with the current cognitive scientific literature. In the first section, I introduce the mechanism of agential control available to individuals when they face a particular inconsistent belief set scenario. What follows this scenario, I argue, is the opportunity for the individual to intentionally relinquish a held belief in order to re-establish consistency. In the second section I present a commonly encountered scenario in which an individual's past take on the truth of a proposition ought to settle the question of whether the proposition is true in spite of her present contrary take on the available evidence. This second scenario draws out Negative Doxastic Control in its second formulation and highlights a kind of doxastic constancy which I will argue shows an agential mechanism of belief control. In the final section I address where my research could take both the current

debate on doxastic agency and other debates concerned with measuring and normatively assessing an agent's capacity for taking responsibility for their beliefs.

4.2 Negative Doxastic Control - Removing a Belief

What you believe today is probably different, at least in some instances, to what you believed this time last week, last month, or last year. Indeed, our total collection of beliefs is not a static array but is rather subject to constant changes, updates and modifications. These changes sometimes occur because we, for one reason or another, come to redeliberate a previously held belief, but more commonly, we change our beliefs in light of new information which puts pressure on some of our past beliefs which we may have misguidedly accepted. In addition to this, it is a well-studied phenomenon that individuals seek to limit wherever possible the psychological distress caused by cognitive dissonance, so a common feature in a majority of cases of belief change is an agent's attempt to maintain a level of consistency amongst their total belief set.¹²² If we, for example, encounter new and credible information which does not contradict our previously held beliefs, we are able simply to add the new belief and its consequences to our total belief set whilst retaining our old stock. If, on the other hand, we receive new and credible information which in some way contradicts or discredits our earlier beliefs, we, in order to retain consistency, must reevaluate and indeed revise our old set of beliefs in order to rationally incorporate the new belief. It is commonplace that we regularly have inconsistent belief sets as we don't have the processing power to trace out all the entailments of our beliefs to identify all the conflicts. The cases I am concerned with is that subset of inconsistencies in which we notice the conflict.

Historically, these changes in belief have been studied through the use of logical frameworks and economic modelling,¹²³ however, there is an intuitive appeal that intention

¹²² Hogan, Robert, John Myrton Johnson, John A. Johnson, and Stephen R. Briggs, eds. *Handbook of personality psychology*. Elsevier, 1997. Pg. 661.

¹²³ See Rabin, Matthew. "Incorporating limited rationality into economics." *Journal of Economic Literature* 51, no. 2 (2013): 528-43 and Camerer, Colin F. *Behavioral game theory: Experiments in strategic interaction*. Princeton University Press, 2011 for excellent discussions of these lines of inquiry.

may also play some role. For my purposes in this section, I wish to take up the challenge of demonstrating how we can epistemologically conceptualise the role of intentions in doxastic changes of this kind. Particularly, I will explore a central theme which I see as playing a substantive role in the changing of some of our previously held beliefs, namely, Negative Doxastic Control.

In order to properly evaluate doxastic control in the context of belief change, it is important to make a few general introductory observations. Although belief revision has been a strong historical theme throughout philosophy, two major “milestones”¹²⁴ occurred in the latter half of the 20th century; firstly, Levi’s (1977)¹²⁵ initial clarification of the formal framework of belief revision, and later, the investigation of belief-set change by Alchourrón, Gärdenfors and Makinson (1985)¹²⁶ subsequently known as the AGM framework. For the authors of the AGM theory, belief-states are proposed as a set of propositions represented by sentences (represented by the symbol K). From here, Gärdenfors (1988) qualifies that “a rational state of belief is one that is in equilibrium under all forces of internal criticism” and that belief change occurs when an agent responds to “the deliverances of experience or ... linguistic (or other symbolic) information provided by other individuals (or machines).”¹²⁷ Therefore, when an agent receives new epistemic inputs, there usually follows an interruption to the equilibrium of the total belief state. In order to remedy this interruption, the AGM theory formulates that three distinct types of belief change can emerge. Hanson summarises the three types:

In contraction, a specified sentence p is removed, i.e., a belief set K is superseded by another belief set $K \div p$ that is a subset of K not containing p . In expansion a sentence p is

¹²⁴ Hansson, Sven Ove, "Logic of Belief Revision", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/logic-belief-revision/>>.

¹²⁵ Levi, Isaac. "Subjunctives, dispositions and chances." *Synthese* 34, no. 4 (1977): 423-455. I do not reflect on Levi’s arguments in this thesis.

¹²⁶ Alchourrón, Carlos E., Peter Gärdenfors, and David Makinson. "On the logic of theory change: Partial meet contraction and revision functions." *The journal of symbolic logic* 50, no. 2 (1985): 510-530.

¹²⁷ Gärdenfors, Peter. *Knowledge in flux: Modeling the dynamics of epistemic states*. The MIT press, 1988. Pg. 7.

added to K, and nothing is removed, i.e. K is replaced by a set $K+p$ that is the smallest logically closed set that contains both K and p. In revision a sentence p is added to K, and at the same time other sentences are removed if this is needed to ensure that the resulting belief set $K*p$ is consistent.¹²⁸

Of the three phenomena identified by the AGM authors, I am interested in investigating the conceptual processes implicit in cases when a new input (eventually inconsistent with K) is added to our belief set, however, in order to maintain consistency, at least one prior proposition in K is deleted. This is the process of belief revision. Consider the following example:

You reasonably believe the following two propositions, (i) that promotions are only given to the hardest working and most talented employee, and (ii) that you are the most talented and hardest working employee in the office. After working for the company for a number of years, it comes time for one member of the staff of 10 to be promoted. You obviously feel pretty confident that it will be you who is promoted, however, to your dismay, you are in fact not the employee promoted, the promotion instead goes to another employee. With the addition of this new information your two previously believed propositions have now become inconsistent as it cannot rationally be the case that both “promotions are only given to the hardest working and most talented employee” and “you are the most talented and hardworking employee” given the fact that you were not promoted.¹²⁹

It seems obvious that at least one of the beliefs in the above scenario needs to be retracted in order to re-establish the internal consistency of the total belief set given the new input. Importantly to this point, Gardenfors asks “how are the choices concerning what to

¹²⁸ Hansson, Sven Ove, "Logic of Belief Revision", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/logic-belief-revision/>>.

¹²⁹ This example is my own.

retract made?”¹³⁰ It is here that I argue that we can exert intentional control over the belief that we eventually decide to retract. In the scenario above we can see that at a particular time we have two evidentially reasonable beliefs, call them p1 and p2. Then at a later time we acquire strong evidence that at least one of these prior propositions is incorrect. We cannot, however, based on this newly acquired evidence be sure which of the prior propositions is incorrect. In order to re-establish our internally consistent belief state however, we are compelled to jettison at least one of our former beliefs. If we, upon some consideration, decide to abandon the belief that “promotions are only given to the hardest working and most talented employee,” this change comes about through our entertaining and ultimately enacting the intention to remove this proposition from our total belief set. Here we can observe that we have moved from belief that p at t1 to no belief that p at t2 through our intention to do so.¹³¹ This example is easily multipliable and demonstrates that in some situations of belief revision we can execute intentional doxastic control over our beliefs.

A possible objection to this example may be to ask ‘why not abandon both beliefs?’ Such an objection, I believe, is well-merited. In defence of the conclusions of the above scenario however, I lean on some theoretical aspects of formal epistemology and computer science which claim that any revision of belief should be minimal. What is called for within this framework is a kind of economical understanding of information wherein information, held in the form of propositions, should not be gratuitously expended if it is not reasonably

¹³⁰ Gärdenfors, Peter, ed. *Belief revision*. Vol. 29. Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pg. 2.

¹³¹ It may be argued that these cases can all be redescribed as cases of belief acquisition. Such as, I used to believe p1 and p2. I now reject p1 because it is inconsistent with p2. I have acquired a new belief: ~p1. But negative doxastic control is supposed to occur in cases other than belief acquisition. This argument does not go through for at least one important reason. This criticism misapplies a key theoretical distinction established by Quine and Ullian (1978, Pg. 8). Their distinction showed that it is conceptually different for an individual to possess a disbelief - belief in the negation of a proposition - and a non-belief - not believing either the truth or falseness of a proposition. From here it is available to us to show that we do not, in the above case, necessarily gain a belief in the negation of the proposition. We may be mistaken about our belief, there may be other factors that we have not considered and so on, however on the meagre evidence at hand, the reasonable action is to move to non-belief and await further evidence. For our example what occurs is that the agent chooses to deflate the status of the belief to that of non-belief through her intention to do so. Therefore, the case presented is conceptually different from cases of belief acquisition because instead of graduating a proposition above the .5 threshold established in Chapter 1, we are intentionally doing the reverse.

required by the situation.¹³² In the above scenario, it is not necessary to remove both beliefs in order to re-establish consistency among the total belief set because either p1 or p2 is reasonably consistent with the new information. In section 4.4 I discuss why I consider this understanding of belief control to be favourable to the positions asserted by the literature discussed previously in this thesis.

4.3 Negative Doxastic Control - Maintaining a Belief

Our beliefs, in addition to being challenged by the input of new information, are regularly contested by internal epistemic mechanisms such as doubt. In many instances, doubt is both a reasonable and warranted doxastic attitude. For example, we may reasonably doubt the competence of our treating physician or the supposedly beneficent motives of a used-car salesman, and given the weaknesses inherent to human capabilities, there does not appear to be anything implicitly unreasonable with this action in these situations. In these instances, we have found ourselves directing our doubt outwards towards another agent, however for what follows, I am interested in cases wherein we direct our doubt inwards towards ourselves. This doubt can come about rationally, for example, if we realistically doubt our capacity to perform some difficult task. However, there can be a far less constructive quality to this kind of doubting. Such doubt can, I will argue, elicit the possibility for an agent to irrationally redeliberate an existing belief during bouts of epistemic conflict. Specifically, the epistemic conflict that I have in mind is drawn out by situations wherein an agent comes to doubt herself about a previously held belief without the addition of any new information because she, for some reason, wrongly elevates the status of some previously benign evidence. Such cases, I broadly conclude, offer a plausible opportunity for Negative Doxastic Control in its second formulation to positively bear on these periods of redeliberation. More precisely, Negative Doxastic Control can positively remedy these situations by allowing the agent to

¹³² See, Schulte, Oliver. "Minimal belief change, Pareto-optimality and logical consequence." *Economic Theory* 19, no. 1 (2002): 105-144 for a more extensive illumination of this topic.

intentionally favour the authority of her previous take on the evidence and choose subsequently to resist the temptation to update her belief set.

As alluded to above, there are obvious cases in which turning our epistemic doubt inwards towards ourselves can render constructive outcomes. If we, for example, are asked to write a paper on a subject in which we have little expertise, it seems wholly logical that we should doubt our ability to write a cogent and compelling paper based on the first-order evidence that we may lack the required proficiency. Indeed, in cases of this ilk, self-doubt seems to eschew hubris and approximate a kind of epistemic humility which can be largely favourable. Moreover, some have argued that it is this kind of epistemic doubt of our first-order beliefs - those beliefs that we have about the world¹³³ - that may seed the ground for our ability to gain knowledge more constructively. Further to this, in some special circumstances, we may find ourselves in a position in which we have acquired a false belief based on our interpretation of our first-order evidence. In these instances, we may require the input of second-order evidence in order to remedy this doxastic failing. Christianson offers a cogent example of when this kind of second-order doubt can be useful:

I'm a medical resident who diagnoses patients and prescribes appropriate treatment. After diagnosing a particular patient's condition and prescribing certain medications, I'm informed by a nurse that I've been awake for 36 hours. Knowing what I do about people's propensities to make cognitive errors when sleep-deprived (or perhaps even knowing my own poor diagnostic track-record under such circumstances), I reduce my confidence in my diagnosis and prescription, pending a careful recheck of my thinking.¹³⁴

¹³³ Schubert, Stefan, and Erik J. Olsson. "On the coherence of higher-order beliefs." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 50, no. 1 (2012): 112-135.

¹³⁴ Christensen, David. "Higher-Order Evidence." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 81, no. 1 (2010): 185-215. Pg. 186.

Christianson determines this example to be a case of “reasonable prudence”¹³⁵ on the part of the doctor because the doctor correctly assesses the new evidence from the nurse to be significant in determining the overall credibility of the doctor’s initial belief. Indeed, we can find many such cases of new second-order evidence reasonably causing doubt about our held beliefs, however, the salient desiderata to consider here is that the doctor received new information which served to undermine her initial belief. What is unclear from this example is whether cases can obtain whereby an agent’s beliefs are challenged even though her evidence remains constant.

Our present take on our evidence is easily corruptible. We may, for example, be swayed by our current emotional state or allow our relationship to particular individuals to bias our current understanding of our previously gathered evidence in any number of ways. In such instances, it may be difficult for us to determine just what to believe. On the one hand, we may think that we should maintain our initial assessment of the evidence, and on the other, our newly acquired self-doubt may seem properly authoritative. It is here that the philosophical challenges concerning how to resolve the inner conflict involved in such cases of whether one’s initial judgment or one’s doubt should prevail become important.

One particular example of where our initial take on the evidence is unreasonably corrupted comes from a case in which we incorrectly elevate the standing of some of our previously held evidence and thus afford it greater influence in our doxastic deliberations. To demonstrate what I mean, let me develop the example of the individual being asked to write a paper a little differently:

As a philosophy graduate student, you are lucky enough to be invited to prepare a paper for publication in an important journal which is reviewed by a number of your favourite academics. You ruminate on what you may write about and after a long period of deliberation you come to write your paper on a particular topic, we will call it T. You,

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

after careful research, come to consider your stance on T to be not only well-supported by the literature but also an important contribution to the field. When it comes time to submit your paper, you again see that some of the reviewers for the journal are academics for whom you have an immense amount of respect. However, this time you immediately feel intimidated by the prestige of the reviewers and the high-standing of the journal and begin to doubt whether your work will meet their exacting standards. In fact, because of the strength of this epistemic doubt you now come to redeliberate your take on the evidence that you had previously researched. As a result, you now believe that you do not have a strong enough understanding of the topic to write a well-argued paper and decide not to go through with your submission.¹³⁶

In this example, we can see that because the author assumes her present (at the time of submission) take on the evidence to be authoritative, she has achieved a wholly negative deliberative outcome. Not only has her evidence been unreasonably defeated, her practical goal of submitting her paper has not been fulfilled. In this case, the salient question is whether or not the young writer could have exercised any doxastic mechanisms in order to overcome the sudden wrenches of second-order doubt that challenged her previous belief? My answer to this question is yes. More precisely, the option available to the author is to be intentionally self-governing by deciding that her previous take on the evidence is the correct one; by utilising Negative Doxastic Control.

Reflecting directly on Christianson's example, Roush (2017) importantly observes that:

it seems in this case that some reconsideration of the first-order matter is required, it is not immediately clear how strong the authority of the second-order might be compared to the first order in coming to an updated belief about the diagnosis, and there are clear cases where the second order should not prevail.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ This example is my own.

¹³⁷ Roush, Sherrilyn, "Epistemic Self-Doubt", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/epistemic-self-doubt/>>.

In our case of the graduate author, it also seems clear that the the newly elevated evidence should not have prevailed. Indeed, to avoid this conclusion, the agent could have been more self-governing in order to stave off the negative implications of the epistemic conflict.¹³⁸ I argue that by confining herself solely to her present perspective, the full credibility of her evidence is not fully apparent to her. The author is called therefore to situate the coherence of her believing across time. In this instance, for the author to ensure the truth of her beliefs it becomes rationally consistent for her to choose her previous take on the evidence over her present perspective. By the lights of the truth-aim condition of belief, we can determine this to be a wholly justified approach. It is therefore the intentional choice available to the young author to deny the influence of her present perspective and maintain her previous belief that we can see as demonstrating the second formulation of Negative Doxastic Control.

4.4 Doxastic Agency: A Wider Lens

In the preceding sections, I offered an account of doxastic control which demonstrates how agents can control their beliefs directly by way of their intentions to do so, in what follows I will defend this account more thoroughly by showing that it is both reasonable and connects more firmly with the available empirical evidence than does the existing debate. I have argued that beliefs can be chosen under descriptions which call for either the removal of a held belief due to new information or the reaffirmation of a held belief in the face of seemingly contradicting evidence. The presented cases are importantly different from cases of

¹³⁸ An objection here might claim that, even though I am right: the negative evidence shouldn't have prevailed, I am describing the agent's first-person perspective. However, she can't know from that perspective that the doubts aren't in fact well motivated. This objection may be true for cases in which new information is added to K, however in the case presented there is no such new information. The agent instead is swayed by an erroneous inflation of the significance of information that she already possessed. In this case, it may be available for the agent to assume something like the disposition to be steadfast in the resolutions of her previous deliberation in cases where the evidence remains constant. This, I think, defeats the perspective criticism because it does not require the agent to assume a potentially alienating or contrived third-person perspective on her evidence. Paul and Morton (2018, Pg. 79) call a similar phenomenon "grit" or "epistemic resilience." Similarly, Titelbaum (2015) calls this "continuing on," wherein a rational breakdown exists when an agent's belief changes but her evidence does not.

belief acquisition for two reasons. Firstly, they focus on circumstances in which an agent *already* possesses a belief but is compelled to make decisions about its continuity. And, secondly, they demonstrate effective ways in which we can intentionally control our beliefs *after* the moments of acquisition. It is my conclusion therefore that we should favour the account of Negative Doxastic Control advanced by this thesis, firstly, because it is reasonable, and, secondly, because it is a better fit for the current empirical evidence.¹³⁹

Those who choose to defend the acquisition of beliefs via doxastic voluntarism claim that some beliefs are voluntary but will inevitably, and rightly, balk at the suggestion that all beliefs are controllable in this way.¹⁴⁰ It seems obvious that I cannot, simply through the force of my will, believe that I am a giant grasshopper¹⁴¹ or that Abraham Lincoln is right now the President of the United States. It is indeed, to a large degree, through the force of both the empirical and conceptual arguments against doxastic voluntarism that we can appropriately set this boundary. My contention here however, is that the cases in which they argue that this control is impossible are too narrow. When we consult the scientific literature, we can reasonably determine that cases of belief acquisition do little to advance the case that agents cannot intentionally control their beliefs. To the contrary, what this literature implies is that if we are to fully grasp the nature of our doxastic agency cases of belief removal will prove far more consequential.

Of the very limited discussion of the role that intention can play in belief change scenarios, Hansson takes a wholly critical position. He writes:

There are several variants of doxastic voluntarism. (Nottelmann 2006; Hansson 2013a)

For our present purposes, the following three distinctions are particularly important:

¹³⁹ It is my contention that cases such as the ones presented demonstrate the conceptual viability of intentional doxastic agency if we examine the ways individual's manage their belief sets under different evidential circumstances.

¹⁴⁰ This point is well made in Salmieri, Gregory, and Benjamin Bayer. "How We Choose Our Beliefs." *Philosophia* 42, no. 1 (2014): 41-53.

¹⁴¹ I borrow this example from Booth, Anthony R. "Doxastic voluntarism and self-deception." *Disputatio* 2, no. 22 (2007): 1-16. Pg. 2.

(1) According to behavioural doxastic voluntarism, the act that we can voluntarily choose is that of believing, i.e. holding a belief. According to genetic doxastic voluntarism, that status is instead assigned to the formation or acquisition of belief. (Audi 2001)

(2) Doxastic voluntarism is complete if it claims that all beliefs are held or formed voluntarily and partial if the claim is limited to only some of our beliefs.

(3) Doxastic voluntarism is direct if it claims that we directly choose to hold or form beliefs and indirect if the claim is only that we perform will-controlled actions that in their turn cause, in ways that may not be will-controlled, the holding or formation of beliefs.

What type of doxastic voluntarism, if any, is needed to support the use of choice functions in belief change? Since belief change is concerned with the formation rather than the holding of beliefs, it may be suggested that we need a genetic variant. Since choice functions are assumed to cover all belief changes, we need a total variant and cannot do with a partial one. Finally, since belief changes are assumed to follow directly in response to the input, we have use for a direct rather than an indirect version. However, doxastic voluntarism that is both total and direct is not epistemologically credible (in either the behavioural or the genetic form).¹⁴²

While there are some valuable insights delivered here, Hansson's critique, I believe, misses the point I am making. Hansson's remarks are guided, as with the bulk of the literature, to belief acquisition scenarios. However, it has been well-demonstrated throughout this thesis that belief acquisition never obtains intentional control. Moreover, responses to much of the literature supportive of such control have shown their author's arguments to be

¹⁴² Hansson, Sven Ove. "Choice and change in an epistemic context." *South American Journal of Logic* 1 (2015): 365-385. Pg. 367. The references for his claims are locatable in his original paper so I won't reference them here.

precarious. It is not the claim of this work, therefore, to defend intentional control in belief acquisition scenarios, but rather to demonstrate that intentional control of our beliefs can obtain in situations permitting Negative Doxastic Control. The ‘genetic’ formulation as Hansson describes is, I argue, inconsequential to the conclusion that we can sometimes intentionally control belief removal. Accordingly, Hansson’s further determination that choice functions must cover all changes of belief similarly misses my main assertions. As we observed in the preceding sections, belief change which does not bear on the internal consistency of our total belief set does not require intentional control. However, when the consistency of our total belief set is challenged, many scenarios permit, and sometimes call for, the use of intentional control. In addition to this, it has been shown that belief change can occur via a misaimed second-order doubt about our first-order beliefs. When this happens, new informational input is not required to force an agent to abandon a reasonably held belief. Again we can see that the analysis of a ‘genetic’ form of belief control has little to say in this scenario but a focus on the negative aspects of belief control becomes relevant.

To the second point, and perhaps more importantly, it has been my intention here to demonstrate that Negative Doxastic Control better suits the current empirical evidence concerning beliefs. As Mele crucially highlighted “The extent of our self-control regarding what we believe is an empirical issue in need of further empirical investigation”¹⁴³ and because of this we can see that our philosophical notions of belief control must at least learn from the results of the cognitive sciences. Because my argument has relied on a reflective equilibrium between empirical and conceptual arguments, it is, I contend, better suited to advancing our understanding of doxastic agency. Indeed, by widening the lens of our accounts of doxastic agency to include the contributions of our negative intentional control over beliefs, we can better appropriate the scientific literature into our philosophy, a consequence which we ought to look upon favourably.

¹⁴³ Mele, Alfred R. *Self-deception unmasked*. Princeton University Press, 2001. Pg. 103.

4.5 Future Investigation

If I am right, and the lens of what can reasonably be called doxastic control is wider than the current debate permits, a number of interesting questions arise. Firstly, we may ask how does this new form of control impact on theories of doxastic responsibility? Secondly, we may ask can this form of control be extended to other cases? And lastly, we may ask how can we order our beliefs so that we can choose the right one?

To answer the first question, I think that my current research may make some contribution to future investigations regarding doxastic responsibility. If we are to take that responsibility in some way entails a form of control, what becomes interesting is how intentional belief revision could influence our understanding of doxastic responsibility. Some interesting recent analysis has focused on the kind of responsibility agents should assume for the evidence that they choose not to incorporate into their doxastic deliberations.¹⁴⁴ This work attempts to draw a line between the motivated exclusion of evidence and the subsequent apportioning of blame. The future of this fruitful line of research may also include an account of blameworthiness for beliefs we fail to remove from our total belief sets in response to evidence.

To the second question, I believe that there are other cases that could offer more insight into Negative Doxastic Control. This thesis has only been able to develop two of the most obvious cases of Negative Doxastic Control. Because of this, I have the sense that many other scenarios could be envisaged which could credibly account for Negative Doxastic Control.

Finally, a number of interesting developments have sought to answer how belief change can be modelled so that beliefs are chosen correctly. I think that this research may

¹⁴⁴ See, Ballantyne, Nathan. "The significance of unpossessed evidence." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 65, no. 260 (2015): 315-335 and Goldberg, Sanford C. "Should have known." *Synthese* 194, no. 8 (2017): 2863-2894 for excellent introductions to this research.

fruitfully inform further consideration of Negative Doxastic Control in both of its formulations.¹⁴⁵

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I developed two realistic examples which show how individuals can be intentionally self-determining with regard to their beliefs. These examples form the basis of my argument that the possibility of doxastic agency is indeed conceptually viable. It has been necessary to formulate this argument because, as I showed, the commitments of the empirical defence of involuntarism demonstrate only that we cannot control belief acquisition, and consequently if we follow the prescriptions available in chapter 2 we end up with a theory that fails to account for the type of control that I have identified. And, because I demonstrated that the conceptual defence of involuntarism is bound to our current take on the evidence, if we follow the prescriptions available in chapter 3 we may end up with suboptimal doxastic deliberation wherein we are called to abandon a belief without due cause.

If we are to, as I argue we should, examine our doxastic mechanisms through applications of negative rather than positive control, what becomes evident is that the scope of doxastic agency becomes far wider than the current debate concedes. This widened scope, I commit, is both rational and scientifically sound, allowing for the conclusion that we can sometimes control our beliefs because we intend to do so.

Additionally, this research clears the space for new and potentially fruitful approaches to a number of contemporaneous debates. Thinking about doxastic agency in terms of our ability to control beliefs after they have entered into our doxastic framework may prompt renewed discussion of how responsible we are for beliefs we fail to give up rather than the beliefs that we should not have believed in the first place.

¹⁴⁵ Of particular interest is Williams, Mary-Anne. "Applications of belief revision." In *Workshop on (Trans) Actions and Change in Logic Programming and Deductive Databases*, pp. 287-316. Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg, 1997.

Conclusion

My work here has centred on the defence of two interrelated theses. Firstly, I argued for my destructive thesis that the empirical and conceptual defences of involuntarism are flawed because they present their case against intentional doxastic agency by only considering forms of acquisitional control. Accordingly, I mobilised this argument as my destructive thesis. Secondly, through my constructive thesis, I argued that there are better mechanisms for making forceful assessments about the conceptual viability of doxastic agency. I, following Rott (2017), configured these mechanisms as forms of Negative Doxastic Control and demonstrated how they may be employed to validate cases where individuals can control their beliefs because they intend to do so.

After considering the background to the current debate in chapter 1, in chapter 2 I critically appraised the empirical defence of involuntarism. I charitably claimed that this defence exhibits a robust apparatus through which we can scrutinise the possibility of believing at will. However, due to its overreliance on a positive form of control, I showed that the premises of the empirical defence do not accord with a number of empirical studies concerning how individuals exhibit doxastic control. This I argued, is sufficient to show that the empirical defence of involuntarism cannot wholly vindicate the dismissal of intentional doxastic agency.

In chapter 3 I critically developed the conceptual defence of involuntarism. Again, while this defence of involuntarism has had some success, it ultimately fails to rule out intentional doxastic agency. This is because, as my destructive thesis showed, its reliance on an individual's present first-person take on what is true leaves this defence vulnerable to suboptimal deliberation. As such, I argued that this vulnerability may be remedied by focusing on how individuals deliberate over time, a consideration once again brought about by appealing to cognitive scientific data. This ultimately revealed that Negative Doxastic Control in its second formulation could positively contribute to the current debate.

In chapter 4 I expounded my constructive thesis by showing how Negative Doxastic

Control in both of its permutations operates. In the first instance, we can use Negative Doxastic Control to regulate whether or not we are to give up a currently held belief. In its subsequent formulation, I showed how Negative Doxastic Control can be used to determine whether to continue on with a reasonably held belief in the face of epistemic conflict. These formulations, I argue, are both rational and consistent with the conclusions of current scientific research. Additionally, I showed that if we are to develop doxastic agency along these lines, a number of interesting research directions become available.

Overall, I think that Negative Doxastic Control offers an important contribution to the ongoing debate regarding the viability of doxastic agency. I contend that, because the scope of doxastic agency is in fact far wider than the current debate permits, it is too hasty to mount our conclusions to what currently exists. If we are to conclusively rule on whether we are agents with respect to believing, I argue that we must keep this widened scope in sight. In this thesis I have offered what I think amounts to a successful defence of the conceptual viability of doxastic agency, the nuance of which I hope to investigate in my future work, should the opportunity arise.

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