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# Moore's Paradox, Direct Doxastic Voluntarism, and Atheist Distrust

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## Abstract

*The concept of belief is analyzed and then discussed within the context of the current climate of atheist distrust in America. To begin, Moore's Paradox, and its relationship to an important claim made by Wittgenstein regarding false beliefs, is explored. Next, the definition of belief that results from affirming Wittgenstein's claim is outlined and subsequently defended from an attempted refutation constructed by John N. Williams. The defended definition of belief, which regards direct doxastic voluntarism as false, is then used to argue that atheists do not directly choose to not believe in any gods so as to evade moral responsibility.*

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Direct doxastic voluntarism is the notion that human beings have direct and voluntary control over their beliefs, and it is commonly regarded as false (Booth 2007, 115-130). In this paper, I will refute John N. Williams's attempt to invalidate a claim made by Ludwig Wittgenstein that, if successfully invalidated, would give credence to the doctrine of direct doxastic voluntarism. Therefore, by defending Wittgenstein's claim, which is based on Moore's Paradox, I am indirectly defending the stance that direct doxastic voluntarism is false. Next, in an effort to use philosophical theory as a form of social activism, I will explore the implications of refuting Williams by examining how the falsity of direct doxastic voluntarism affects people that identify as atheists or non-believers. To be more specific, I will argue that while the unfavorable reputation of atheists in America should be reconsidered for numerous reasons, one specific reason that deserves more attention is that an atheist's lack of direct control over her lack of belief in God should eliminate the worry that atheists choose to not believe in God so as to escape the moral codes commonly offered by religions. To begin on this complex journey of theory and application, I will first describe Moore's Paradox and how it is essential to this discussion.

## Background: Moore's Paradox

Ludwig Wittgenstein was apparently impressed by G.E. Moore's discovery of a type of absurdity that arises from phrases such as the following: "It is raining but I don't believe that it is raining" (Malcolm 1984, 56). Wittgenstein went on to coin the term "Moore's Paradox" for this brand of absurdity in his book entitled *Philosophical Investigations*. After analyzing Moore's discovery, Wittgenstein concluded, "If there were a verb meaning 'to believe falsely', it would not have any significant first person indicative" (Wittgenstein 1958, 190). Put in simpler terms, Wittgenstein concluded that one cannot reasonably make the assertion, "I falsely believe that *p*."

While this one conclusion may seem trivial in comparison to the remainder of *Philosophical Investigations*, it is an extremely powerful statement because it indirectly defines belief as a system of information acknowledgment that is subject to instantaneous modification. In other words, if someone acknowledges that her belief that  $p$  is incorrect, her belief that  $p$  immediately changes to take into account the perceived error (it is a perceived error because the new belief may not be objectively true). In an attempt to invalidate Wittgenstein's conclusion, John N. Williams (2006) provides a complex counter-example in his paper entitled "Wittgenstein, Moorean Absurdity, and its Disappearance from Speech" that, despite its complexity, fails as a refutation (225-254). Before delving into the argument presented by Williams and its implications, it is necessary to elaborate further on the definition of belief that emerges from Wittgenstein's conclusion.

### The Concept of Belief

Beliefs are typically acquired through observation, experience, experiments, or logic. This accounts for both empirical beliefs, those based on sensory evidence, and *a priori* beliefs, those based on reasoning alone. To focus in on empirically derived beliefs, consider two hypothetical people's beliefs about the solar system: Quinn believes that the sun orbits the earth while Jane believes that the earth orbits the sun. Quinn has been convinced that the sun revolves around the earth by (incorrectly) using a telescope he bought at a garage sale. Jane has been convinced that the earth revolves around the sun by scientific evidence conducted by various people over the last few centuries. While both Quinn and Jane arrived at their respective conclusions via empirical evidence, it is important to note that Jane's evidence was derived from the scientific method and Quinn's was not. It is technically possible for Quinn to be correct in his belief (it is also technically possible that unicorns real) and Jane to be incorrect, but this is simply not likely for obvious reasons. However, in terms of belief, it does not matter whether the sun does the orbiting or not, because Quinn and Jane have both been *convinced* that what they believe is true. Therefore, all that matters for belief is that the evidence was compelling.

Evidence for a belief can be extremely hollow, but as long as a believer is convinced, then the belief will persist. In fact, more important to a belief than the validity of the evidence is the conviction of a believer. Once convinced that  $p$ , a believer cannot directly choose to believe that  $\text{not-}p$ , which means that direct doxastic voluntarism is false. For example, suppose that Bob is asked, "Do you believe that Santa Claus is real?" If Bob were truly convinced by some evidence that Santa Claus was real (say, a doctored photograph of Santa Claus flying through the air that Bob thought was a legitimate photograph), then a truthful response would be "Yes, I believe Santa Claus is real." If Bob claimed that he did not believe, then he would be lying since he was *truly* compelled by the evidence. On the other hand, the same evidence may not compel another person, such as Joe. Joe is convinced, based on a lack of any scientific evidence that Santa Claus is real, that Santa Claus is simply a fictitious character. Joe could truthfully respond by saying "No, I do not believe that Santa Claus is real." To say that he did believe would be a lie. It would therefore be contradictory for a person to say, "I am *convinced* that Santa Claus is real based on the evidence I have analyzed, yet I do not *believe* that Santa Claus is real." This reflects the standard definition of belief and goes against direct doxastic voluntarism.

Since belief is based on the acknowledgment of information through experience or reason, then it follows that it is subject to instantaneous modification. As people acquire and integrate new information into their belief systems, their previous beliefs can either remain intact

or shift depending on how compelling they find the information. When a belief shifts due to modification, it can be a small shift or a drastic one. An example of a drastic shift would be an atheist instantly becoming a theist after seeing God appear in the sky. Drastic shifts like this one seem to suggest that beliefs are black and white; either you are a theist or an atheist. However, when smaller shifts occur, it is clear that there are degrees to belief. For example, a person that believes that God exists might slightly shift her view after hearing a lecture on evolution. She still believes that God exists, but not to the same degree as before. In examining Richard Dawkins's (2006) spectrum of theistic probability as outlined in *The God Delusion*, it is clear that a dichotomous issue (God either does or doesn't exist) does not mean that people's beliefs are dichotomous:

1 Strong theist. 100% probability of God. In the words of C.G. Jung: "I do not believe, I know."

2 De facto theist. Very high probability but short of 100%. "I don't know for certain, but I strongly believe in God and live my life on the assumption that he is there."

3 Leaning towards theism. Higher than 50% but not very high. "I am very uncertain, but I am inclined to believe in God."

4 Completely impartial. Exactly 50%. "God's existence and non-existence are exactly equiprobable."

5 Leaning towards atheism. Lower than 50% but not very low. "I do not know whether God exists but I'm inclined to be skeptical."

6 De facto atheist. Very low probability, but short of zero. "I don't know for certain but I think God is very improbable, and I live my life on the assumption that he is not there."

7 Strong atheist. "I know there is no God, with the same conviction as Jung knows there is one." (Dawkins 2006, 50)

Based on this belief spectrum, it is perfectly feasible that one might shift her view to a degree of complete doubt where she finds the existence of God to be exactly equiprobable with the nonexistence of God (which is marked as a 4 on Dawkins's scale). This shows that while belief may appear black and white for dichotomous issues, it actually lies on a spectrum with certainty that  $p$  placed opposite to certainty that not- $p$ . In reality, God (by most standard definitions) either does or does not exist ( $p$  or not- $p$ ), but our belief on the issue lies on a spectrum. For issues that are less clearly dichotomous, such as whether or not someone is bald, the same spectrum of belief applies. For example, I could hold a strong belief that someone is mostly bald while I could not hold a strong belief that God mostly exists.

To further detail the instantaneous process of belief modification, suppose you are inside a windowless house when it begins to rain. Convinced that it is not raining, you step outside to see that it *is* in fact raining. The instant that you acknowledge your mistake about the rain, your belief about the rain changes too. Before stepping outside you might say, "I believe that it is not raining." Upon stepping outside, you see that it is clearly raining. Although you see it is raining, you could still maintain the belief that it is not raining if you have not truly acknowledged that it is raining. This is important because it shows that the brain's reception of sensory data is not the sole cause of the modification of belief. Someone with perfect human vision could have her eyes

directed at the rain, with the visible light hitting the retina, causing the brain to process the sense data, and still she may not acknowledge the rain. For example, one might be spaced out or distracted by some other thought that causes the visual data to go unacknowledged. However, the precise instant in which one acknowledges that it is raining is also the precise instant in which the belief changes. Clearly, the input of sense data (visible light in this example) is crucial for the acknowledgement to occur, but the belief does not change without the acknowledgement of the data. Therefore, the acknowledgment of new evidence is directly linked to a person's belief about a particular subject.

The fact that sense data alone does not form beliefs is evidenced by a phenomenon called change blindness, defined as the “difficulty in detecting, visible—sometimes quite conspicuous—differences when the differences are viewed successively” (Dretske 2004, 1). Fred Dretske (2004) provides the following example of change blindness: “I’m looking for a friend in a crowd. I can’t find him. He sees me and waves. I then see him. As it turns out, I was, several times, looking straight at him, but before he attracted my attention by waving, I didn’t see him” (1). In this example, sense data is entering the brain of the looker through the eyes, and yet for some period of time the looker has not acknowledged that she is receiving this sense data. Until she acknowledges her friend she does not yet believe that she is looking at him. Once she realizes that he is there then her belief instantly changes. While it is up for debate as to whether the looker was *consciously aware* of her friend before acknowledging him or whether she *knew* that the friend was there before she acknowledged him, one thing is certain: sensory data precedes acknowledgment.

### Wittgenstein and Williams

To summarize thus far, beliefs are acceptances of perceived truths that can change instantaneously. In support of this view of belief, Wittgenstein offers his conclusion that a verb meaning “to falsely believe” would have no meaning in the *first person* present indicative. For example, “I falsely believe that today is Tuesday” is absurd whereas “Bob falsely believes that it is Tuesday” is not. Ultimately, Wittgenstein’s conclusion is that one can never admit to a mistaken belief in the present tense indicative because the instant that a belief is deemed mistaken in the mind the belief is modified. When this modification occurs, the belief is no longer mistaken; it is a *new* belief. This includes instances when a belief turns into a lack of belief in something. For example, a theist who has never read the Bible may claim, “I believe that God exists.” After reading the Bible she may change her belief from a positive belief in God to an absence of belief in God. Now she might claim, “I find God’s existence and non-existence to be equiprobable,” which is a rare but viable stance to take. If the person finds additional compelling evidence that God doesn’t exist she might even go as far as saying, “I do not believe that God exists.” This is the stance of an atheist. In this example, the person started with a positive view of God’s existence and then transitioned to an undecided view of God’s existence, and finally ended up with a negative view of God’s existence. At no point in this evolution of a belief could the person claim, “I mistakenly believe...” without speaking in a contradictory manner.

Having established the standard view of belief, we can now examine Williams’s attempt to refute Wittgenstein’s claim about a hypothetical verb meaning “to falsely believe.” The scenario that Williams provides as a refutation involves Superman approaching him and informing him of three *true* things: First, that Williams is acquainted with Superman when he is

wearing his disguise; second, that Williams works with the disguised version of Superman at the Daily Planet; third, that Williams thinks that the disguised version of Superman is an idiot. Since Williams is acquainted with multiple coworkers whom he regards as idiotic, he is not aware of which coworker is in fact Superman. He also realizes that since Superman has superior intelligence, he has been falsely regarding one of his coworkers as being an idiot. Assuming that Williams takes Superman's information to be completely accurate, Williams feels obligated to express his mistaken belief about his unknown coworker. After tailoring his assertion in an attempt to avoid any contradiction or absurdity, Williams (2006) tells Superman: "I mistakenly believe you are an idiot whenever I meet you disguised as that colleague at the Daily Planet" (249). While at first glance it appears that Williams has successfully used the first person indicative of "to believe falsely (or mistakenly)," a closer inspection reveals a problem with his logic. Even a complex example involving alter egos and disguises cannot make possible any assertion that begins with "I mistakenly believe..." without the speaker lying or being self-defeating.

For the sake of simplicity, let's assume that there are only two people (say, Clark and Carl) at the Daily Planet that Williams believes are idiotic before Superman revealed the information about his alter ego. Next, it must be made clear that Williams is truly convinced by what Superman has told him, meaning he absolutely believes that one of the two (perceived) idiots at work is actually Superman in disguise. After hearing Superman's information, Williams feels the need to express to Superman that he mistook either Clark or Carl for being a fool. In the response that Williams gives he begins the sentence with "I mistakenly believe." This would be incorrect since Williams has accepted new information about the situation and therefore no longer falsely believes them both to be fools. In fact, Williams whole-heartedly believes (since he absolutely trusts Superman) that one of them is merely acting the part. To be correct, Williams could say, "I mistakenly *believed* you were an idiot whenever I met you disguised as that colleague at the Daily Planet." If Williams feels compelled to speak in the present tense without contradicting himself he could say, "I believe that either Carl or Clark is merely acting like an idiot" or "I believe that you are merely acting like an idiot disguised as either Clark or Carl." Williams has failed to notice that his assertion is inaccurate since it does not take into account the newly obtained information.

By proposing a counter-example to Wittgenstein's claim, Williams is indirectly arguing against the standard view of belief and for the truth of direct doxastic voluntarism. If Williams had been successful with his Superman scenario, he might have effectively altered the linguistic utilization of belief. If one could assert, "I mistakenly believe..." without any logical problems, then the current view of belief would be further complicated. If Williams felt that his example was cohesive and sound, he should have explored possible ramifications on the traditional view of belief. Instead, Williams quickly dismisses Wittgenstein's claim (after crafting his first reply to Superman, "I mistakenly believe that you are an idiot") without truly acknowledging the impact of his dismissal: "Moreover, in apparent contradiction of Wittgenstein, I seem to have used the first-person present indicative to make a non-self-defeating assertion" (Williams 2006, 248). Until a valid counter-example can be constructed, Wittgenstein appears to be correct in his claim about first-person present tense assertions of false belief.

### **Belief, Language, and Time**

In addition to providing an explanation for the absurdity found in Moore's Paradox, one of the main goals of Williams's (2006) article is to understand situations in which the absurdity disappears (225-254). While Williams is successful in his explanation of Moore's Paradox, he fails to give a full account of why the absurdity disappears in certain contexts. More specifically, his account is missing an explanation of why the absurdity disappears when referring to the past or future. At its core, the absurdity of Moore's Paradox arises out of the linear nature in which our language refers to time. Whether time is in fact linear, our language most certainly regards it as so. The past, present, and future tenses of words can be viewed as a timeline in which events have occurred. As Williams briefly mentions, the absurdity of Moore's Paradox vanishes when the assertions are made in the past or future tense. However, instead of providing an explanation of why the absurdity disappears, he simply provides an example for both the past and future tenses. This lack of explanation leaves his account of Moore's Paradox deficient. By examining the past tense and then future tense versions of Moore's Paradox, it is clear that the underlying reason for the disappearance of the absurdity is the same.

For the past tense, Williams (2006) gives the example, "Yesterday I failed to correctly believe that it was raining" (238). As Williams correctly notes, this assertion is not absurd. The reason for the lack of absurdity is that the past tense is quite different from the present tense in that it refers to a larger set of moments. When speaking in the first-person past tense, one can refer to any moment from the beginning of her existence up until the present moment, whereas the first-person present tense refers to only one moment: the present moment. (Of course, since we are referring to the first-person uses of belief in the past tense then the timeline begins at the first moment in which the person making the assertion held a belief. In his example, Williams narrows down the number of moments by referring to yesterday, but his example could have easily been less restrictive such as, "I failed to correctly believe it was raining.") Because the past tense refers to multiple moments, the hearer of Williams's phrase can assume that what is actually being said is, "Yesterday, while it was raining, I believed that it was not raining. However, between that moment and now I have been convinced that it was in fact raining when I thought it was not. Therefore, yesterday, I failed to correctly believe that it was raining." Speaking in the past tense does not necessitate that all the events in an assertion occurred simultaneously. If the realization (and thus the formation of the belief) that it *was* in fact raining occurred simultaneously with the assertion of belief that it was *not* raining, then the same problem that arises from present tense assertions would occur. In other words, the assertion is not the equivalent of saying, "Yesterday, while it was raining, I believed that it was not raining. After acknowledging that it was raining, I still held my false belief that it was not raining." Thus, one cannot assert simultaneous acknowledgement that *p* and disbelief that *p* in the present or the past tense. Nor can a person assert such a thing in the future tense.

Like the past tense, the future tense also deals with a large number of moments. For this same reason, the future tense of Moore's Paradox does not produce any absurdity. Williams (2006) gives the example, "Tomorrow I will mistakenly believe that Big Brother is not a fiction" (238). This example is not absurd since Williams may be accurately predicting the outcome of a scheduled brainwashing. The disappearance of the absurdity is due to the fact that the mistaken belief that Big Brother is not a fiction does not coincide on the timeline with the current acknowledgement that Big Brother is a fiction. In other words, Williams will never acknowledge that Big Brother is a fiction while simultaneously believing that it is not a fiction. To keep things simple, let's use the rain example to understand what it is at play. One might say, "Tomorrow I will mistakenly believe that it is not raining" without any absurdity. In reality, what is being said

is, "I currently believe that it will rain tomorrow. However, while it is raining, I will be convinced that it is not raining." Just as with the past tense, the future tense of Moore's Paradox eliminates the absurdity because the acknowledgement of  $p$  and disbelief that  $p$  do not occur simultaneously.

### **Direct Doxastic Voluntarism**

Now that we have established that beliefs are instantaneously modified to take into account any new, contradictory, and compelling information, it is important to discuss how this affects the degree of choice one has in believing or not believing that  $p$ . To begin, let us clearly define these terms "new," "contradictory," and "compelling" as they relate to belief so as to avoid any confusion. Technically speaking, every moment of human existence is new, even if it contains familiar stimuli or if it echoes past events. Therefore, everything (every thought or every piece of sense data) is novel and thus can potentially shift a person's beliefs. For example, I may take a shower every single day without it affecting my belief in God until one day the first sensation of hot water on my arm triggers a seemingly random thought in my brain that causes me to lose my faith completely. Now, although technically new, familiar stimuli and experiences typically have less power in changing beliefs than new stimuli and experiences. In addition, relevant stimuli and experiences have a greater chance of shifting my beliefs than irrelevant ones. In the shower example, it was a familiar and irrelevant stimulus that changed my mind about God, which is rare. Therefore, beliefs are typically changed in the presence of unfamiliar and relevant stimuli and experiences, which explains the power of persuasion that documentary films have. For example, my opinion on Japanese whaling is more likely to change while I am watching my first documentary on Japanese whaling (unfamiliar and relevant stimuli) than if I am taking a shower (familiar and irrelevant stimuli).

Next, we must define what is meant by contradictory evidence when referring to beliefs. Contradictory evidence refers to any evidence that depicts the truth about something as different from one's current belief about that something. In other words, contradictory evidence does not imply that the evidence being processed is the complete opposite of a person's current belief. For example, if I believe Santa Claus is real and that flying reindeer carry his sleigh, I might come across some contradictory evidence that demonstrates that while Santa Claus is real, he is actually carried by flying Bolivian marsh deer. This new information contradicts my previous belief about Santa Claus, but it only contradicts one aspect of my belief. This is important to note because it emphasizes the fact that beliefs can evolve gradually and subtly. Losing one's belief in God is more commonly a subtle and gradual process as opposed to a violent removal of a rug from beneath one's feet. This is evidenced by Jesse M. Smith's (2011) study on the process of becoming an atheist where he analyzes a series of in-depth interviews he conducted with self-avowed atheists. He argues that atheists undergo a gradual process of forming their atheistic identity, which involves a period of questioning theistic and religious beliefs. A number of participants in the study specifically described the slow progression and thoughtful consideration that lead them to reject theism (Smith 2011, 215-237).

Finally, the term "compelling" (which can be used interchangeably with the word and concept of "convincing") must be defined in a tautological fashion: evidence is compelling if it results in the change of a person's belief(s). In other words, when referring to belief, the degree to which something is compelling is identical to the degree to which a person's belief shifts. Or, to put it negatively, if something does not shift a person's belief(s), then it was not compelling to

her. For example, if Melissa truly finds *The God Delusion* to be extremely compelling evidence that there is no God, then her belief in God would have to have shifted to a large degree, say from a 2 to a 5 on Dawkins's spectrum of theistic probability. If she only found the book to be mildly compelling then her belief in God might have only shifted from 2 to a 3. If I truly have a strong belief in God then it simply means that my life experiences (that is, the totality of all that I have experienced, thought, sensed, dreamt, felt, etc.) have compelled me to have a strong belief in God. Of course, what two different people find compelling may be wildly different, which means that the degree to which one finds evidence to be compelling is subjective. This explains why a theist might find the beautiful arrangement of colors displayed during a sunset to be compelling evidence that God exists while an atheist might find the same event to be compelling evidence that there is no God.

This analysis supports a view of belief that opposes direct doxastic voluntarism since being compelled by new and contradictory evidence is not a choice; it occurs instantaneously with acknowledgment of information. As the analysis of Wittgenstein's claim revealed in the previous section, the reason why acknowledging a mistaken belief in the present moment is self-defeating is because beliefs update instantaneously with information acknowledgment. In fact, the distinction between acknowledgement of information and the modification of belief is illusory since they describe the same single event. Therefore, for direct doxastic voluntarism to be true, it would mean that either acknowledgment of information is a choice or that acknowledged information could be willfully negated. For the first horn, acknowledgment of information could not be a choice because to have a choice in acknowledgment would mean that one has acknowledged the information in the first place. In other words, to choose to be unaware that  $p$  first requires one to be aware that  $p$ , which would mean that one is already aware that  $p$ . As for the second horn, our definition of belief requires that this is impossible. If we can negate a belief at will then we did not truly believe it because we were clearly not compelled by the evidence. In other words, something that can be un-believed at will was not a belief in the first place.

### **Doxastic Voluntarism and Atheist Mistrust**

Atheism, for many people, has a strong negative connotation. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that empirical evidence demonstrates that atheists are some of the most distrusted people in both private and public settings in the United States (Edgell, Hartmann, and Gerteis 2006, 211-234). While there are certainly multiple reasons for such distrust, one common reason is that people fear that a lack of belief in any gods equates to a lack of morality. Instead of arguing that atheists can be as good as anyone else in terms of morality, I want to focus on why people come to the conclusion that atheists are less moral than other members of a society. Research supports the hypothesis that the relationship between atheist distrust and the belief in God is fully mediated by the view that people will behave better if they believe that God is watching over them (Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan 2011, 1189-1206). In other words, people fear that if someone doesn't believe in God then she may misbehave because she can get away with it. Again, instead of arguing that this is not the case, I want to argue that an atheist's lack of control over her beliefs should eliminate any worry that atheists choose to be atheists so as to be able to misbehave under the belief that no God is watching over them. In other words, the falsity of direct doxastic voluntarism means that atheism is a view that is not arrived upon by a simple choice to evade moral responsibility.

To argue this position, I first want to point out that being part of one of the most distrusted groups of people in the United States is not desirable. While many ex-theists certainly feel happier once they become atheists, this does not mean that being an atheist, especially an outspoken one, is not often challenging. Why then do people become atheists if being an atheist means carrying such a negative stereotype? While there are numerous reasons for becoming an atheist, a recent study by Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006) found that in spite of the benefits that religious affiliation can offer as well as the fact that belief in God is the norm in America, atheists are often people that “could not make themselves believe” (42). In addition, these researchers also found that the skepticism towards religion and God that atheists foster is mainly a result of concerns about empirical evidence and logical consistency. That is, atheists were not found to deny God so as to free themselves of any moral restrictions that religion or theism might impose (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006, 39). That being said, some people still regard a person's switch to atheism as a simple choice that was made out of the selfish desire to not be held responsible by God for certain actions (as an undergraduate I attended a university approved lecture where the speaker claimed that atheists choose to reject God so as to become “moral degenerates”). As our analysis of belief has demonstrated, people do not have direct control over their beliefs. Therefore, a theist cannot simply wake up one morning and decide to be an atheist because she wants to misbehave. Without any new, contradictory, and compelling evidence, one cannot simply change her belief in God at will. Of course, it is theoretically possible that the very decision to change her belief functioned as new, contradictory, and compelling evidence to change her belief, but this is extremely unlikely. The fact that many atheists want to believe in God but simply cannot convince themselves that God exists demonstrates the inability for one to directly choose her beliefs.

One might object and claim that while direct doxastic voluntarism is false, indirect doxastic voluntarism is true. Indirect doxastic voluntarism is the notion that people have indirect control over some of their beliefs, and it is largely accepted to be true (Vitz 2011, “Doxastic Voluntarism”). By choosing to research certain topics and to evaluate certain evidence, people gain indirect control of their beliefs. For example, Lily could indirectly choose to be an atheist by reading books by prominent atheists. Coupled with her desire to lose her belief in God, she might be able to successfully convince herself that there is no God. Of course, this would still require her to find the evidence compelling, otherwise her efforts would be in vain. Considering that many atheists try to become theists by seeking out experiences and evidence that would affirm the existence of God and still fail to change their beliefs, it stands to reason that some beliefs are less subject to indirect control than others.

What we can draw from this is that while indirect doxastic voluntarism allows for some people to indirectly choose to change their belief on the existence of God, it is certainly not an instantaneous change. It requires research, thoughtful consideration, and seeking out life experiences that might shift one's perspective. And still, with all of this effort, there is no guarantee of successful belief modification. In fact, it is entirely possible that a person's search for compelling and contradictory evidence causes her to strengthen her original belief. Unlike the indirect voluntary control one has in learning violin, where the more hours spent practicing generally correlates positively with skill level, trying to indirectly change one's beliefs can often backfire. I can speak from personal experience that my becoming an atheist resulted from an attempt to reaffirm my shaky belief in God. I wanted to believe, so I spent countless hours trying to convince myself to no avail. In the end, it was only through thoughtful consideration and research that I declared myself to be an atheist. Therefore, because the nature of belief leaves

humans with only the potential for indirect control over their belief in God, those who distrust atheists out of fear that they choose not to believe in God so as to misbehave have little to no reason to do so.

### **Conclusion**

Moore's Paradox is vastly interesting because the absurdity that it reveals also uncovers a great deal about the concept of belief. In addition, Wittgenstein's claim based on Moore's Paradox indirectly reveals some essential features about the nature of belief. Belief is a system of information acknowledgment that is instantaneously modified with new, contradictory, and compelling evidence, which explains why humans cannot easily change their beliefs even if they want to. By defending Wittgenstein's claim from Williams's attempted invalidation, we have indirectly argued against the doctrine of direct doxastic voluntarism. Since people cannot directly and voluntarily control their beliefs, then the distrust of atheists that results from the worry that atheists choose a Godless life so as to be able to misbehave is unwarranted. While the validity of the doctrine of indirect doxastic voluntarism demonstrates that we have indirect control over some of our beliefs, it does not guarantee that any amount of effort can change certain beliefs. Therefore, atheists should not be feared or distrusted since their atheism did not arise out of a simple choice to evade moral responsibility. My hope is that a better understanding of atheism and what it entails will eventually eliminate the unwarranted prejudice that exists in our current social climate.

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