Epistemic Freedom Revisited

(Forthcoming in *Synthese*)

Suppose an eccentric millionaire comes to your door with the following credible offer: she will give you a million dollars if you believe that you will be a millionaire. Should you believe that you will be a millionaire? The answer to this question is complicated by the fact that the belief that you will be a millionaire is self-fulfilling. It belongs to the class of beliefs whose contents will be true just in case you believe them, because you believe them.2

An agent attempting to answer this question faces a distinctive puzzle. Since the belief is self-fulfilling, it is true that she will be a millionaire, if she believes that she will be a millionaire. And since she knows that the belief is self-fulfilling, she will have good evidence that she will be a millionaire, if she believes that she will. But while it may be true that once she holds a self-fulfilling belief, she will thereby have good reasons for her belief, she does not have this evidence yet, because she does not yet have the belief that she will be a millionaire. Such an agent seems to find herself in the odd position of having information which would provide evidence on the basis of which she could sustain a belief, but which does not yet provide any evidence for which she might adopt the belief in the first place. How ought such an agent proceed?

In this paper, I want to examine a sustained attempt to answer this question, proposed by David Velleman. Inspired by the work of William James, Velleman attempts to

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1 Earlier versions of this material was presented to audiences at UCLA, Oxford, Notre Dame, and The National Autonomous University of Mexico. I am grateful to everyone who commented on those occasions, and in particular to Thomas Kelley, Barbara Herman, Lee-Ann Chae, Brian Hutler, and Andrew Ball. The material has also benefitted enormously from written commentary and conversation from Pamela Hieronymi, Andrew Hsu, Tyler Burge, Calvin Normore, Eric Schwitzgebel, Ralph Wedgwood, Stephen White, Andrew Jewell, Eileen Nutting, and Adam Masters.

2 As Dahlback (forthcoming) shows, an analogous puzzle can be formulated in terms of credences and corresponding objective probabilities.
resolve the problem by advocating a form of Epistemic Freedom with respect to self-fulfilling beliefs: since whatever the agent believes will be true, the agent “may expect whatever… he wants.”

In section one, I will reconstruct a general account of Velleman’s view. I will argue that two central points underpin Velleman’s concept of epistemic freedom. First, that cases of self-fulfilling belief constitute cases of epistemic permissivism – cases in which an agent may permissibly adopt either of two different doxastic attitudes toward the same proposition. Second, that in cases of epistemic permissivism, it is possible for us to believe at will, i.e. to believe directly, on the basis of practical reasons.

In sections two and three, I separately examine and argue against each of these points. In section two, I argue against Velleman’s defense the possibility of epistemic permissivism. I argue that though it is frequently the case that one’s practical reasons can permit each of two contrary actions, the nature of theoretical reasoning is structured so as to resist an analogous permissible adoption of either of two contrary doxastic attitudes toward the same proposition. In section three, I argue that even if we were to accept that there are circumstances where theoretical reason permits two contrary doxastic attitudes toward a proposition, it will not follow that we will thereby be capable of believing at will.

I will thus argue, contra Velleman, that self-fulfilling beliefs fail to constitute an important exception to the widely accepted claim that believing at will is both impossible and epistemically impermissible. Why then revisit the notion of epistemic freedom? Because as the ensuing discussion will make clear, though it is widely accepted that believing at will is impossible, it is not at all obvious why self-fulfilling beliefs should not constitute an

^3 Velleman (1989): 66
important counter-example; understanding how Velleman’s argument goes astray requires a
careful examination of the aim and structure of theoretical reason. This investigation of
epistemic freedom will thus have broader philosophical implications: by attending closely to
the special case of self-fulfilling beliefs, we can gain important insights into the nature of
theoretical reason more generally.

In particular, I will argue, attending to the case of self-fulfilling belief reveals the
importance of carefully distinguishing between the aim of acquiring a true belief and the aim
of believing what is true. While one cannot usually fail to establish that one will acquire a
true belief without establishing the truth of the believed proposition, in the case self-fulfilling
belief the two can come apart. I will argue that insofar as the aim of belief has to do with
determining whether the believed proposition is true, there will be substantial barriers to the
possibility and permissibility of believing for pragmatic reasons.

§1. Self-Fulfilling Belief and Epistemic Freedom

There is, of course, one important, practical, sense of ‘should’ in which it is clear that
you should believe (or at least, get yourself to believe) that you will be a millionaire. There
are also certain broad understandings of our epistemic aims on which it will be clear, on
epistemic-consequentialist grounds, that you should believe that you will be a millionaire: it
may be that in believing that you will be a millionaire, you will be better positioned to
achieve some larger epistemic end of acquiring true belief and avoiding false beliefs (perhaps
by putting the millionaire’s resources to good epistemic use). This may give you a certain sort
of epistemic reason to believe that you will be a millionaire.

4 In fact, the view that self-fulfilling beliefs involve a distinctive form of Epistemic Freedom has enjoyed a
recent resurgence. Some or all of Velleman’s position has been taken up by Dahlback (forthcoming); Drake
(forthcoming); Raleigh (2017); McHugh (2015); Peels (2014); Reisner (2013); and Foley (1999). While I will
reference some important contributions to Velleman’s underlying position from these works in sections II and
III, I will continue to focus on Velleman’s original argumentation, since it continues to be the fullest account
and most robust defense of the position.
One distinctive feature of Velleman’s account of Epistemic Freedom is the promise of explaining how such beliefs might be not just pragmatically, but epistemically, permissible: licensed on the basis of relatively uncontroversial assumptions about the role of evidence in epistemic justification and the epistemic sense in which belief aims at the truth.\(^5\)

On Velleman’s view, what licenses you to form self-fulfilling beliefs, such as the belief that you will be a millionaire, is the complex fact that as soon as you are in the state of believing that you will be a millionaire, the fact that you believe that you will be a millionaire will provide you with good evidence to support your belief.\(^6\) In order for this fact about your future evidence to license your belief, we must understand the evidential requirements for belief broadly: it can be rationally permissible for an agent to adopt a belief, not only when she already has evidence for the truth of the belief, but so long as she will have evidence for the truth of the belief, once held.

Velleman defends this broader interpretation of the evidential requirements by showing how such an interpretation is consistent with what he sees as the underlying purpose of epistemic norms: that they help a believer attain the epistemic aim of true belief. Says Velleman:

> This purpose may well require a rule that one shouldn’t retain a belief unless one has evidence of its truth. But does it require a rule that one shouldn’t form a belief without prior evidence? I say no – at least, not if one has evidence that the belief would be true if one formed it. \textit{Why would rules designed to help one arrive at the truth forbid one to form a belief that would be true?}\(^7\)

\(^5\) Nothing I say will count against these other ways of establishing our license to self-fulfilling belief. What I hope to argue is (a) that such a license cannot be grounded in an uncontroversial epistemic picture of the aim of belief and (b) that on a relatively attractive reading of the aim of belief, there are significant barriers to such beliefs ever being permissibly adopted.

\(^6\) I want to distinguish here two different claims about what might justify the self-fulfilling belief: the fact that the agent will have evidence for the belief, once held, and the fact that the belief will be true, if held. There is some textual evidence for attributing to Velleman each view (see, e.g. fn. 7 and fn. 14). While the positions are importantly different, these differences will not affect the discussion to follow.

\(^7\) ibid, 63. (Emphasis added)
Velleman here makes what I think to be an important observation – while following your evidence is usually a sure method for arriving at the truth, it is not the only sure method. In cases where the outcome of our deliberation helps determine the truth of our belief, that belief may be formed absent prior evidence of its truth, but not thereby be formed irrespective of its truth.

But while Velleman may be right that beliefs arrived at ahead of the evidence may be nonetheless reliably connected to the truth, he has not yet provided an explanation of how we, as believers, when faced with the millionaire’s challenge, are supposed to determine what to believe, if not by following the evidence. For while we may want to know, of some already existing belief, how and whether that belief is reliably connected to the truth, this is not the only role for an account of theoretical rationality to play. There is also an important sense of ‘theoretical rationality’ concerned with how we, as rational believers, ought to arrive at those beliefs in the first place.⁸ We might be concerned, from within the perspective of the agent engaged in theoretical reasoning, with the sorts of reasons she might rationally employ in her reasoning⁹ and the sorts of norms and requirements which might rationally guide her in that theoretical reasoning.¹⁰

As an account of how a rational agent should engage in theoretical reasoning about self-fulfilling beliefs, Velleman’s theory faces two obstacles, which I shall mention briefly

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⁸ There are two related questions we might ask about the believer’s theoretical reasoning: one normative, concerning the requirements governing how we should engage in theoretical reasoning; the second descriptive, concerning the limits on how it is possible to come to form beliefs through reasoning or other related processes. I will focus on the normative question in section II, and the descriptive question in section III.

⁹ While this does not require the strong ontological claim that reasons be the kinds of objects which can be used in reasoning directly, it does assume a tight connection between reasons and reasoning. I am assuming that reasons for belief – whether they are facts or mental states – must be relevant to the agent’s reasoning. See Mitova (2017); Way (2015); or Hieroymi (2005) for a defense of this position, as well as discussion of the some of the difficulties such a view faces.

¹⁰ Though there may be other important epistemological projects, this seems at least one important epistem project with which we might be concerned. See Goldman (1980) for further discussion of the difference between this more regulative sense of ‘theoretical rationality’ and other, more evaluative, senses of ‘theoretical rationality.’
here and then proceed to discuss in more detail. First, a theory which claims that a believer should believe what will be supported by her future evidence appears to run ahead of her possible reasons for believing: at the time one is initially engaged in deliberation about what to believe, one does not yet have that evidence available to employ as a reason to believe. Second, the theory appears to underdetermine what an agent is to believe: in at least many cases when a belief is self-fulfilling, both a belief that p and a belief that not-p will be such as to be supported by evidence, were one to believe them.

\[a. \text{The Attraction of True Belief}\]

If Velleman’s theory is to be an account of how, from the perspective of the agent, one ought to engage in theoretical deliberation, it must provide reasons which the agent might be able to employ in coming to adopt her belief, not just reasons to support the belief once held. And these reasons cannot be the evidence that would support the belief only once it is believed, because, as the agent does not yet have the belief, she cannot yet employ that evidence in her initial deliberation when adopting the belief to begin with.

Here is how Velleman first addresses the question of how the agent is to arrive at a belief, despite lacking the evidence for the belief at the time the belief is formed:

forming a self-fulfilling belief isn’t really “running ahead” of the evidence: it’s running toward the evidence – that is, toward evidence that will consist in the belief itself… what would attract him to a conclusion for which the evidence still remained to be completed? What attracts him, in most cases, is simply the prospect of making the conclusion true by jumping to it.\[11\]

The idea, I take it, is that your reason for believing that you will be a millionaire just is the fact that you will have evidence for holding the belief once you believe it. And this reason, unlike evidence you lack until the belief is held, can be available to guide you in acquiring the belief. For while you may not be able to adopt a belief on the basis of evidence you lack until

\[11\] Velleman (1989): 64
the belief is acquired, you might still be able to treat the fact that you will have evidence later (a fact which you have access to now) as a reason to adopt the belief.

But though the fact that you will have evidence for holding the belief once you believe it can be a reason for which you believe that you will be a millionaire, it is still not clear how this reason can suffice, on its own, to explain your believing that you will be a millionaire. This is because you have the very same reason to believe that you will not be a millionaire. For if you believe you will not be a millionaire, you won’t. And once you believe you won’t, the fact that the belief is self-fulfilling will give you evidence to support your belief that you won’t be a millionaire. So if all that attracts you to an outcome is the prospect of making the conclusion true, we still lack an explanation of why you jump to the conclusion that you will be a millionaire, rather than jumping to the conclusion that you will not be a millionaire.

The fact that you will have evidence to support a belief, though it can be the kind of reason employed by a deliberating agent, can be at most a beginning of the story of why you believe that you will be a millionaire, not the end of it. And this is troubling, since no story in terms of further epistemic reasons – either having to do with the evidence you now have, or the evidence you will have – appears forthcoming.

b. Practical Reasons and Self-Fulfilling Beliefs

It is here that it first becomes important that the example we are using – that of being a millionaire – is an example which involves a question about whether or not some positive, or desirable, state of affairs is so. Velleman agrees that more needs to be said to finish the story of how, in the face of symmetrical reasons, the agent believes that p, rather than not-p. His response is that what breaks the tie for the agent when she is deciding what outcome to believe is that she would prefer to believe that she will be a millionaire –
that is, that the agent decides between which of the two conclusions to believe on the basis of her practical considerations for preferring one or the other.

This may look like a surprising continuation, if what you were expecting was a continuation of the story of why you will, rather than won't, be a millionaire. Unlike the fact that your belief that you will be a millionaire will be supported by evidence, the fact that it would be good if you were a millionaire does not appear to bear any connection to the truth of your belief. So it is very hard to see how this can provide you with any further epistemic reason to believe that you will be a millionaire.

This, says Velleman, is because these practical considerations are not further epistemic reasons to believe that you will be a millionaire. But this is no problem, for while more needs to be said to explain how a rational agent jumps to one conclusion rather than the other, no more needs to be said about the epistemic reasons for which the rational agent comes to her conclusion. No more needs to be said about the reasons for which an agent arrives at the belief that p when the belief is self-fulfilling, because while the fact that a self-fulfilling belief that p will be true when believed does not give an agent reason to believe that p rather than believe that not-p, it can still provide the agent with reasons sufficient to show that a belief that p will be true. Unlike a sufficient explanation of how one comes to a belief or action, which must rule out the alternatives, a sufficient justification of why one believes or acts need not require one rule out all the alternatives.

Those who are unhappy with this answer, Velleman suggests, are reluctant because they have forgotten an important lesson from Harman, that:

the pattern of reasoning is not its logic. The order of theoretical reasoning, for instance, is the order in which beliefs are formed, which is a psychological matter. But beliefs aren’t necessarily formed in order of logical dependence – premises first, conclusions following. Often we adopt a conclusion and then look for evidence, or reject evidence once we see
which conclusion it supports. Logical order is something that we try to attain in our beliefs, but we don’t attain it by forming beliefs in their logical order.\cite{antill:12}

If our completed reasoning shows that our belief will be reliably connected to the truth, no more needs to be said in terms of a rationalizing explanation. All that needs to be provided is a psychological story of how we jump to one conclusion over the other. The story is that we simply choose whichever conclusion we prefer to jump to, by bringing to bear in our reasoning practical considerations which show jumping that way to be choice-worthy. We decide at will what conclusion to believe, and then engage in theoretical reasoning to support it.

Velleman admits that this move is unconventional. That we prefer a certain outcome is not a further reason to think the outcome will happen. But, he thinks, we do not need any more reason – we already had sufficient epistemic reason to permit belief in either outcome. To demand, when either belief is epistemically permissible, that the explanation of how we arrive at one belief rather than the other be in terms of further epistemic reasons is to demand answers where no further answers exist. So far as theoretical rationality is concerned, as long as one has reasons which show a belief is reliably connected to the truth, no more needs to be said. And as the requirements of theoretical rationality are satisfied either way, nothing is stopping us from rationally believing at will, on the basis of practical reasons.

c. Summary

In summary, Velleman advocates a form of epistemic freedom with respect to self-fulfilling beliefs: since the outcome will be whatever the agent expects, the agent “may expect whatever… he wants.”\cite{antill:13} When faced with a self-fulfilling belief, you ought to adopt a

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\item \cite{antill:12}: ibid, 108; See also Harman (1973)
\item \cite{antill:13}: Velleman (1989): 66
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belief on the basis of considerations which show that were you to believe that p you would have a true belief, and on the basis of considerations in virtue of which you might wish or want to believe that p.\textsuperscript{14} For Velleman, this reasoning will involve an amalgom of practical and theoretical reasons. The first set of considerations suffice to show your belief that p will be true if you believe it, and so make your belief theoretically permissible, and the second set of considerations suffice to show your belief choice-worthy, and so makes your choosing to believe it practically rational.

I have argued that two points underpin this picture of epistemic freedom. The first point involves a form of epistemic permissivism we enjoy with respect to self-fulfilling beliefs. Our theoretical reasons – those considerations which show that a belief will be supported by evidence – can provide us with \textit{sufficient} reason to permit the self-fulfilling belief that p, even though they do not provide us with determining reasons to believe that p, rather than believe that not-p. The second point is that this phenomenon of epistemic permissivism makes possible a limited form of doxastic voluntarism. When whatever we believe with respect to some proposition is epistemically permitted, we are free to believe at will on the basis of further practical considerations.

I think there are problems with both points. First, I will argue that we have strong grounds for thinking that in theoretical deliberation, unlike practical deliberation, sufficient reasons must also be determining reasons – reasons to believe that p \textit{rather than} not-p. If right, this result can help explain why there can be no cases of epistemic permissivism. Second, I will argue that even if there are circumstances where our reasons can permit two contrary doxastic attitudes toward a proposition, it would not follow that we could believe at

\textsuperscript{14} The most plausible examples of this pattern of reasoning involve the (purportedly) self-fulfilling beliefs Velleman is most interested in: our beliefs about our own actions.
will whatever we like. Epistemic permissivism would not make possible the limited kind of
doxastic voluntarism which Velleman’s picture of epistemic freedom requires.

While the proceeding arguments will not establish that epistemic permissivism and
doxastic voluntarism are impossible, I hope to show that understanding how Velleman’s
argument falls short will highlight the significant barriers to establishing his desired
conclusion.

§II. Self-Fulfilling Belief and Epistemic Permissivism

To recapitulate, Velleman holds that your reason for believing that you will be a
millionaire is that the belief will be supported by evidence, once you believe it. Moreover,
Velleman holds that this reason is sufficient not only to provide ex ante justification for your
belief, but to come to adopt the belief in the first place. He thinks that this is sufficient reason
for which you can come to believe that you will be a millionaire because, by showing your
belief to be reliably connected to the truth, it shows now that what you believe will be true. If
this is a sufficient reason to believe that you will be a millionaire, then you also have
sufficient reason to believe that you will not be a millionaire, since the fact that a belief is
self-fulfilling also shows that this contrary belief will be reliably connected to the truth as
well. Velleman is endorsing a form of epistemic permissivism – your epistemic reasons
permit either of two contrary doxastic attitudes toward the same proposition.

In this view, Velleman has been joined by Peels (2014); Reisner (2013) and Foley
(1999). Wedgwood (2013) endorses a related, but importantly different claim for the
correctness conditions of belief. As we will see, however, it is not obvious, from the fact that a
belief that $p$ and a belief that not-$p$ would both be correct, that a belief that $p$ and a belief that not-$p$ would both be permissible, in the sense at issue.\(^\text{15}\)

Velleman’s argument rests on the premise that whether some set of reasons is sufficient to permit a belief is a matter of whether they suffice to show that the agent has met her epistemic aim of true belief.\(^\text{16}\) Roughly: an agent’s reasons for believing that $p$ are sufficient just in case those reasons are sufficient to show the belief that $p$ true. But so stated, this formulation contains an important ambiguity. The “belief” whose truth must be shown might refer to a belief-state, or it might refer to what is to be believed – a proposition. Accordingly, in adopting a belief that $p$, there are two different possible sets of considerations that might be required for an agent to satisfy the aim of belief: considerations sufficient to show that the agent will acquire a true belief and considerations sufficient to show that the believed proposition is true.

It is rare that this ambiguity is important. A set of considerations cannot, in normal circumstances, be sufficient to show that you would be believing something true without also being sufficient to shown that the proposition to be believed is true.\(^\text{17}\) In fact, the best way to determine whether you will have a true belief-state is usually by way of determining whether the believed proposition is so.

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\(^{15}\) Since permissivism has been enjoying a bit of a resurgence in recent years, it is worth emphasizing precisely how radical this present form of permissivism would be. Some people think that there can be reasonable disagreement between epistemic peers, or, more radically, that the very same person might follow one of two or more equally reasonable principles for weighing reasons, and so might, depending on which principle they are following, be permitted in adopting one of two conflicting doxastic attitudes. (See Schoenfield (2013). But while there is some debate over these weaker forms of permissivism, there is near universal support for the thesis that the very same rule, applied to the same person in the same context, should not permit both believing or disbelieving, as Velleman’s Epistemic Freedom would entail.


\(^{17}\) I contrast what would be true with what is true, because I assume that the truth of a proposition is eternal (though, in the case of self-fulfilling belief that $p$, $p$ is eternally true only because you will eventually believe it). Nothing hangs on this assumption, however. If one accepts some thesis about the indeterminacy of future contingents, one can instead speak of the contrast between what would be true and what will be true.
This is because, usually, the truth of a proposition is independent of an agent’s belief in that proposition. This means that if p is false, it follows that you would also, in believing that p, believe something false. But when the truth of a proposition depends on whether you believe the proposition, this no longer follows. For were you to believe that p, the truth value of p might thereby be different than it is in the actual world, where you will not.

This can be seen most clearly by looking at what I will call ‘self-defeating beliefs.’ Consider a possible Moorian proposition of the form: q but I don’t believe that q. Such a proposition may be true in the actual world, though an agent may not arrive at a true belief were she to believe it, because in such counter-factual circumstances, she would also believe q, and so the Moorian proposition would be false.

Conversely, for some self-fulfilling belief that p, it may be both that the proposition p is false (because, actually, you do not and will not believe it) and also that you would still, in believing p, believe something true, because in the counter-factual circumstances where you believe that p, p would have been true, in virtue of your having believed it. In such cases, that p is so no longer guarantees that, in believing that p, you would be believing a truth, or that, in believing not-p, you would be believing a falsehood.

This has two important consequences. First, it means that, in such circumstances you no longer need to determine whether p is so to determine whether, in believing that p, you would be believing something true. For you may be in a position to determine that your belief would be true regardless of whether the proposition you are believing is true.

Second, it means that, given the appropriate counterfactuals, you may find yourself in the position of having both reasons which show that, in adopting the belief that p, you

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18 These are what Gombay (1988) refers to as the “paradoxes of counter-privacy” or, more recently, cases Bykvist and Hattiangadi (2013) refer to as deliberative ‘blindspots.’
would adopt a true belief, and which show that, in adopting the belief that not-p, you would adopt a true belief. Because while two such beliefs cannot not both actually be truly held, it could nonetheless be that either belief, were it held, would be held truly. In these cases, by establishing that whatever you might come to believe, you \textit{would} believe something true, you can establish that whatever you do come to believe, you \textit{will} believe something true.

And when a belief that p is self-fulfilling, you are in precisely such a position. The fact that a belief that p is self-fulfilling is sufficient to show that in believing p, you would be believing something true, and it is also sufficient to show that in believing not-p, you would be believing something true.

Consider now the prospects for epistemic permissivism on the second reading of the aim of belief, on which sufficient reasons for belief must suffice to show that the proposition to be believed is true. Could the fact that a belief that p is self-fulfilling be sufficient both to show that p is true and to show that not-p is true? I think the answer is surely no. Nothing is sufficient to show that, since p and not-p cannot both be so. Since p and not-p cannot both be so, your reasons, insofar as they are sufficient to show p true, will thereby be sufficient to show not-p false.

This is importantly different than the case of practical deliberation about what to do. In practical deliberation, an agent may find herself in circumstances in which two contrary actions involve equally good outcomes. The fact that sufficient reasons for belief, unlike sufficient reasons for action, must also be determining reason can be explained in part because of a fundamental difference between the good and the true. While two incompatible states of affairs, p and not-p, might both be equally good, they cannot both be equally true.
The sorts of cases of permissivism one finds on the practical side are precluded on the theoretical side by the law of non-contradiction.\textsuperscript{19}

And so, if we accept the second reading of the aim of belief, sufficient reasons for the belief that \( p \) must also be determining reasons for believing that \( p \), rather than not-\( p \). For in order for a set of reasons to show that the world is a particular way, they must also thereby be sufficient to rule out it not being that way. In consequence, the fact that you will answer correctly however you answer the question whether \( p \), because it is not yet sufficient to distinguish which of \( p \) or not-\( p \) is so, cannot yet be sufficient to show either \( p \) or not-\( p \) true. More simply: knowing that whatever you answer will be correct is not the same thing as having an answer.

When what we believe affects what will be so, the question \textit{whether, in believing} \( p \), \textit{I will believe something true} may be answerable when the question \textit{whether} \( p \) is not. The fact that a belief is self-fulfilling can give reasons which are sufficient to answer the first question, by showing that you as a believer are reliably connected to the truth, without being sufficient to answer the question of what is so. For though your beliefs are reliably connected to the truth, it is not because they are tracking some independent truth in the world, but rather because they are determining how the world will be. So in knowing a belief will be reliably connected to the truth, you do not yet know how the world is.

What Velleman’s argument from the aim of belief reveals, then, is not that self-fulfilling beliefs are permissible, but rather the remarkable fact that sometimes the aim of acquiring a true belief and the aim of believing what is true can come apart.

\textsuperscript{19} The differences between truth and the good only entail differences in the permissibility of acting and believing on the assumption that sufficient reasons for believing must be reasons sufficient to show \( p \) true. (whereas two contrary actions might still be permissible, even on the assumption that reasons for acting must be sufficient to show the action choice-worthy or good). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for helping me to see the importance of this point.
Velleman’s permissivism rests crucially on the fact that we take the first reading of the aim of belief rather than the second. Insofar as the aim of belief is concerned with our accuracy as believers, the fact that a belief is self-fulfilling can permit both the belief that \( p \) and the belief that \( \neg p \), for it shows that in believing either, we will believe truly. If instead the aim of belief is concerned more directly with our theoretical reasoning about the truth of the believed state of affairs, it makes more plausible an account where reasons which are sufficient to believe that \( p \) must give us reasons for answering the question ‘is it (or will it be) the case that \( p \)?’ one way rather than the other. And so the fact that a belief is self-fulfilling, rather than permitting both the belief that \( p \) and the belief that \( \neg p \), will on its own be insufficient reason to permit either one.

Once we are able to see these two interpretations come apart, I suspect that Velleman’s position loses much of its initial appeal. Much of the initial promise of Velleman’s defense of epistemic freedom was that it could provide a basis for epistemic permissivism grounded in relatively widespread and uncontroversial assumptions about the role of evidence and the epistemic aim of true belief, and avoid the potentially problematic commitments involved in attempts to justify believing that you will be a millionaire on pragmatic or epistemic-consequentialist grounds. Neither of these promises will be realized if Velleman’s argument requires us to endorse the first interpretation of the aim of belief in order to be successful.

First, even if we were to accept the first interpretation of the aim of belief, it would no longer be the case that the conclusions concerning epistemic permissivism are derivable from an uncontroversial picture of the epistemic aim of truth. In fact, a defense requires a commitment to a substantive and controversial \textit{state-centered} view of the object of the aim of belief, rather than a \textit{proposition-centered} view. The fact that there is an alternative reading of
the aim of belief which does not permit self-fulfilling beliefs mitigates the dialectical force of Velleman’s driving observation, echoed in Reisner (2014; Raleigh (2017); and Drake (forthcoming), that epistemic rules concerned with the truth which fail to permit self-fulfilling beliefs will be self-defeating. They will be self-defeating only on accounts concerned with acquiring true beliefs, rather than establishing the truth of the believed proposition.

Second, while I lack space to argue fully for the latter interpretation, I think there are independently attractive grounds which support the second interpretation of the aim of belief and make the first interpretation potentially problematic. One such problem is that the state-centered interpretation threatens to blur the distinction between belief and action. Part of how we distinguish belief from other goal-directed mental activities like guessing or silently asserting is by holding that believing is not a special sort of goal-directed activity, distinctive only in that it must involve the goal of producing true (or otherwise valuable) beliefs. Rather than a particular sub-species of intentional action, beliefs are often characterized as a distinctive kind of attitude, whose function is to discover and track how the world is (or at least the relevant bit). But insofar as this is our purpose as believers, we should not, as rational agents engaged in inquiry about what the world is like, be satisfied with knowing that our

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20 c/f section I pages 3-5.
21 This is particularly troubling given that many (though not all) of the seminal works on the aim of belief are explicitly proposition centered views. Wedgwood (2002) for example, glosses the claim that belief aims at the truth as the claim that “a belief is correct if and only if the proposition believed is true.” Indeed, Velleman himself appears, to endorse the second interpretation in later work, glossing the aim of true belief in Velleman and Shah (2005) as the aim of “believing p only if p.” If right, disentangling these two interpretations of the aim of belief allows us to see that Velleman’s defense of epistemic freedom requires an interpretation of the aim of belief which Velleman himself does not unequivocally endorse.
22 A contrasting case put to use with great effect in Owens (2000) and Owens (2002).
beliefs will be true, whatever those beliefs turn out to be. We need to determine the truth of the proposition about which we are believing.\textsuperscript{23}

A second problem is that the state-centered conception of the aim of belief will have difficulty avoiding complications concerning the wrong kind of reasons for belief.\textsuperscript{24} If we think of the aim of belief as an aim to produce an epistemically valuable doxastic state, we need an explanation of why these reasons for producing this epistemically valuable state of affairs don’t need to compete with pragmatic reasons for producing non-epistemic values. Even if such an account were forthcoming, so that we could rule out pragmatic reasons for belief stemming from the non-epistemic value of a belief, the state-centered account of the aim of belief still invites a potentially problematic form of epistemic consequentialism. If we think of the aim of belief in terms of producing an epistemically valuable end product, it will become more difficult to explain why we should not also accept the permissibility of believing in obviously false propositions to promote the acquisition of other epistemically valuable true beliefs, or the overall accuracy of our believing.\textsuperscript{25}

The reliance on the state-centered conception of the aim of belief thus further undermines some of the dialectical appeal of grounding epistemic permissivism in the aim of true belief, by re-raising issues that grounding permissivism in the aim of true belief was supposed to avoid. Since philosophers sympathetic with the possibility of pragmatic or epistemic-consequentialist reasons for belief will already be sympathetic to the possibility of

\textsuperscript{23} This sort of argument finds support in its ability to explain what Shah and Velleman (2005):5 refer to as the “transparency” of doxastic deliberation: the phenomenon by which “the deliberative question whether to believe that p inevitably gives way to the factual question whether p”

\textsuperscript{24} See, especially, Parfit (1984) and Hieronymi (2005)

\textsuperscript{25} An argument presented forcefully in Berker (2013). As Berker points out, self-fulfilling beliefs are compatible with a more narrow epistemic consequentialist requirements, restricted to producing correct doxastic states in individual propositions, which avoids some of these counter-examples. However, if the foundation of epistemic rationality is the aim of acquiring true belief, it seems, at the least, a further puzzle what would motivate restricting consequentialist requirements in such a way.
epistemic permissivism, it is unclear whether raising the case of self-fulfilling beliefs will add much force for the conclusion, once we have cleared up the state-centered sense of the epistemic aim of truth on which the force of these examples relies.

The results of this section do not count decisively against the possibility of epistemic permissivism.\textsuperscript{26} They do, however, show how using the example of self-fulfilling belief to defend such a conclusion is more difficult than often imagined. Not only have we established that the conclusion does not follow automatically from the view that belief aims at the truth, we have also shown the substantial barriers for any subsequent attempt to defend epistemic permissivism, for those who find the second version of the aim of belief attractive.\textsuperscript{27}

If we endorse a reading of the aim of belief according to which sufficient reasons to believe that p must be sufficient to show p true, this view will lend support for, and help explain why, two contrary beliefs cannot both be permissible. Given that we accept such a view, we have a new way of establishing the uniqueness thesis from the fact that sufficient reasons for believing some proposition, p, must also be determining reasons – reasons to believe that p rather than not-p.\textsuperscript{28}

§III. Self-Fulfilling Belief and Doxastic Voluntarism

In the previous section, I argue against the claim that when a belief is self-fulfilling, we may permissibly believe either p or not-p. But let us grant for the moment that the fact that a belief that p is self-fulfilling can provide an agent with epistemic reasons which are

\textsuperscript{26} Raleigh (2017), for example, is explicit in his willingness to accept an epistemic consequentialist defense of epistemic permissivism.

\textsuperscript{27} Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this helpful way of framing the point.

\textsuperscript{28} Though epistemic permissivism remains open to someone who accepts the state-centered conception of the aim of true belief, rejects the connection between reasons for belief and the aim of belief, or who denies belief aims at the truth at all.
sufficient to permit both the attitudes of belief and disbelief toward p. Velleman will then have shown that we enjoy a certain degree of rational latitude with respect to self-fulfilling belief. But he has not yet shown that we are thereby capable of believing whatever proposition we want. For when your epistemic reasons permit two attitudes, it’s not straightforward that you can thereby choose one for any reason you please. In fact, it’s not entirely obvious what an agent is to do when her normative reasons are sufficient to permit two contrary attitudes, even in the practical realm where such cases are less exotic.

In this section, I will take up the question of how an agent might engage in theoretical reasoning when her normative reasons are so counter-balanced as to permit belief or disbelief in the same proposition. Even though (as I have argued) there may be no such cases, thinking about what a rational agent would have to do were her epistemic reasons so counter-balanced can help us gain new insight into the nature of theoretical reasoning, just as thinking about similarly situated practical agents can help us sharpen our theory of practical reasoning.

I will pursue this question by looking at analogous cases on the practical side. While these practical analogies may initially appear to favor Velleman’s conclusion about the possibility of believing at will, I will argue that looking closely at these practical cases ultimately reveals important limitations on the possibility of believing at will. Even if we accept a state-centered picture of normative reasons for belief, there remain significant barriers to resolving cases of epistemic permissivism in a way which makes possible anything

29 That is to say, even if we accept that reasons which show a belief will be true might provide sufficient normative reason to permit the belief, there is a further question of whether it is possible to adopt such a belief – a question involving the believers possible operative reasons for believing. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for helping me see this important point more clearly.)
like the familiar notion of believing at will, where we decide what to believe directly on the basis of practical considerations.\textsuperscript{30}

\begin{quote}
\textit{a. Moral Permissivism}
\end{quote}

One place to begin is by looking at cases of \textit{moral permissivism}. These are cases where two or more of some conflicting set of potential actions are both morally permitted, but no one action is morally required. In such cases, most people do think that an agent might then choose one action over the other on the basis of other non-moral reasons. In particular, most people think that an agent can choose one action over the other on the basis of which action she more prefers. You can rationally decide to volunteer at the Red Cross rather than the soup kitchen, for instance, on the basis of your preference for learning first-aid over cooking. And so some have thought, by analogy, that if both the belief that p and the belief that not-p are epistemically permitted, we can believe one over another on the basis of non-epistemic reasons, because we prefer that belief more than the other.\textsuperscript{31}

Still, when moral reasons permit two or more actions, most ethicists hold that an agent cannot just decide to do one action over the other on the basis of \textit{any} reason they please. You cannot, when your moral reasons are tied, decide to volunteer at the hospital because you love Sophocles.\textsuperscript{32} The reasons for which you decide to act, though non-moral, must still help make your decision \textit{intelligible}.\textsuperscript{33} In the case of practical deliberation, a consideration makes a decision intelligible by showing the decided upon action to be

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\textsuperscript{30} In the proceeding, I will rely on a relatively general conception of believing at will, without delving too deeply into the details of what believing at will must involve. For an overview of the ongoing debate about these details, see Bennet (1990); Setiya (2008); and Hieronymi (2009).
\textsuperscript{31} See, for example, Reisner (2009)
\textsuperscript{32} Raz (2001): 215
\textsuperscript{33} This point requires a notion of intelligibility strong enough that it requires a practical reason must bear, for the agent, \textit{some} minimal rational connection to the action, and by parallel, that theoretical reasons must bear some connection to the object belief. This should be acceptable, even to skeptics of 'guise of the good' theses, like Velleman (2000c) or Setiya (2007).
\end{flushright}
favorable, or choiceworthy, in some way. And the reason you can make recourse to prudential reasons when the moral reasons are counter-balanced is that prudential considerations, like moral considerations, are the kinds of considerations which bear (or can be taken to bear) on your question of what to do, by showing some possible action to be choice-worthy.

So not only does this picture of deciding on the basis of prudential reasons in cases of moral ties fail to support Velleman’s claim, it actually raises substantial difficulties for the prospects of believing on the basis of pragmatic reasons. If we were to accept an analogous picture of theoretical reasoning, when your evidence is counter-balanced you would not be able to decide to believe one proposition over the other on the basis of any reason you please. You would need some other category of epistemic reasons – some other category of considerations which still make your believing intelligible by bearing (or being taken to bear) on the truth of that belief.\(^{34}\) And considerations which show one belief to be preferable to another are not such considerations. And so, while such practical considerations can be your operative reasons for deciding to act when your moral reasons are counter-balanced so as to permit two contrary actions, they cannot be your operative reasons for believing when your epistemic reasons are counter-balanced so as to permit two contrary beliefs.

\textit{b. Buridan Cases}

A more promising practical analogue for Velleman may involve cases where two actions are permitted because \textit{all} of an agent’s practical reasons are counter-balanced, not just her moral reasons. How, in practical deliberation, do we decide what to do in such

\(^{34}\) In the previous section, I assumed that an agent’s reasons to believe, or normative reasons, must bear some connection to the truth of the believed proposition. Here I am assuming a less controversial claim: that the reasons for which an agent believes – the agent’s operative reasons – must bear (or be taken to bear) some relation to the truth of that belief.
cases? On one prominent tradition, what breaks the tie is a special act of will. When our reasons are perfectly counter-balanced, we experience the *liberty of indifference*, and may act however we please.\(^{35}\) I suspect Velleman thinks that in the case of an epistemic analogue we may believe however we please. Just as we break the tie in the practical case via an exercise of the will to act, we should break the tie in the epistemic case via an exercise of the will to believe.

But once again, the analogy breaks down when we look more closely at the examples on the practical side. On the practical side, such cases are commonly referred to as “Buridan Cases,” after the example of Buridan’s Ass, torn between two equally appetizing bales of hay. Such Buridan cases divide into two sorts, those involving imperfect and perfect information. In the first imperfect class of cases, a practical agent is indifferent between two options because, given her present information, those two options appear equally promising. Suppose you come to a fork in the road, know that one path leads to your goal, but do not know which. Since you certainly won’t get to your goal if you do nothing, you have reason to pick each of the two paths. But, though you know taking one fork will involve a better outcome, since you don’t know which fork it is you have no available reason to prefer one over the other.

By contrast, the second class of “true” Buridan cases involve situations in which an agent has all the relevant information, and still has equal reason to choose both options. Suppose you learn both paths lead to your goal. Here you must still choose one path over the other without having more reason to choose one path over the other, not because you are missing any relevant information, but because both choices involve what are, in fact, equally good options.

\(^{35}\) For a survey of historical thought on the issue, see Rescher (1960)
I suspect that part of the reason epistemologists have traditionally been unconcerned with Buridan cases has to do with this division.\textsuperscript{36} In cases of imperfect information, epistemologists have held that one is never faced with two permissible attitudes to choose between, because the attitude of withholding is always available as an option in theoretical deliberations in a way that it is not available in at least some practical deliberations.\textsuperscript{37} You may find yourself forced in a situation in which you must \textit{take} one path over the other, but you do not have to \textit{believe} that your path is any more likely to end at your goal. In cases of imperfect information, when one’s epistemic reasons are counter-balanced, the obligatory doxastic attitude is that of suspended judgment.

And epistemologists have assumed that there was no theoretical analogue to the “true” Buridan cases because when one has all the information, one’s reasons will never show two contrary belief states equally reasonable. For unlike practical cases, where two mutually exclusive outcomes can both be equally good, two mutually exclusive states of affairs cannot both be true.

But as we have seen in the previous section, in the special case of self-fulfilling belief one \textit{can} find oneself in deliberative situations where either of two mutually exclusive doxastic states will be true if you to adopt them. Consider, by way of practical analogy, a special case where God will create the hay in whichever direction the donkey chooses.\textsuperscript{38} While the

\textsuperscript{36} A notable exception is Reisner (2014), who deals with the possibility of epistemic Buridan cases explicitly, in just these sorts of situations. Reisner (2014) presents an especially nuanced discussion of epistemic Buridan cases which merits further discussion. Though Reisner uses the possibility of Buridan cases to defend evidential permissivism, it is not clear that his conclusions are in conflict with those I make here. First, strictly speaking, Reisner (2014) does not argue that we \textit{do} in fact have a capacity to believe at will, but rather that there are doxastic Buridan cases where such a capacity would be the only way to secure a true belief. Second, while I take myself to have shown, in this section, that we cannot resolve Buridan cases by believing at will on the basis of pragmatic reasons, I have not argued against the possibility that there may be some other way to resolve Buridan cases to arrive at a true belief. (This is especially relevant since Reisner is particularly concerned with cases of self-fulfilling belief where there may be no practical upshot. In such cases it would be unclear how practical reasons would resolve things.)

\textsuperscript{37} A point made in Feldman (2000): 679-682

\textsuperscript{38} I am grateful to Calvin Normore for this helpful example.
outcomes in turning left or right in such circumstances would be radically different (one direction will have hay, the other will not), the outcomes of deciding to turn left or right would be the same. Self-fulfilling beliefs appear to be theoretical analogues to this special sort of “true” Buridan case on the practical side. Given these similarities, we might look to the practical responses to Buridan cases, and see what relevance they have to the case of self-fulfilling belief.

There are several theories of what a rational agent is to do in practical Buridan cases, but none of them, I will argue, are going to help us reach Velleman’s position that when either of two beliefs are epistemically permissible, we can believe at will whichever we want. Moreover, attending to the practical case and its epistemic analogue will help explain why a capacity to believe at will has features which make such an ability ill-suited to help resolve a case of epistemic permissivism.

c. Practical Responses

I turn now to consider the possible practical responses to Buridan cases. One possibility on the practical side is that when our practical reasons are counter-balanced, we fail, or should fail, to choose anything. And while ethicists have tended to doubt that rational agents would be so asinine as to starve amidst an over-abundance of good choices, it might be less strange to think that a rational agent would be unable to make up their mind about what to believe when faced with an over-abundance of possible true beliefs. This option is of no use to Velleman however, since what Velleman wants is some story about how we can adopt a belief in the face of counter-balanced reasons.

Among ethicists who think that Buridan’s Ass does not starve, there are broadly two lines of thought as to why. One generally Aristotelian line is that I chose to act under an action description for which my reasons are not counter-balanced, and some causal or
explanatory mechanism decides the particulars.\textsuperscript{39} Thus, I might decide to take some path, and while I will take either path A or path B, I do not choose to do so on the basis of some further reason, but rather do so on the basis of some purely causal process.

Of course, even if we accept the controversial thesis that we can perform the same action under a variety of descriptions,\textsuperscript{40} this option is famously unavailable to us in the doxastic case. Belief contents are opaque, and if we believe that a state of affairs obtains under two different descriptions, we have two different beliefs. I cannot believe, for example, that there is treasure at the end of path A by believing there is treasure at the end of some path, in the way I can perhaps intend to take path A by intending to take some path.

The second line of thought is that when we are faced with counter-balanced reasons to act, we exercise a special power of the will to just decide upon one action or the other.\textsuperscript{41} When I come to the fork in the road, rather than acting as the result of weighing the balance of my reasons, I just pick whichever action I like.

This may look more promising for Velleman as a practical analogue, since it appears to get him exactly what he needs. Just as you exercise your will to pick what to do when your reasons for acting are counter-balanced, you exercise your will to pick what to believe when your reasons for believing are counter-balanced. I suspect that this, or something close to it, is what Velleman has in mind in claiming we can believe at will. However, a closer examination of what must be involved in this special exercise of the will reveals such an analogy to be unworkable.

\textsuperscript{39} A position championed by Avverroes (1954), and more recently, by Donald Davidson (1963): 687-688.

\textsuperscript{40} See on the one side, Anscombe (1957), on the other Davidson (1963).

\textsuperscript{41} A position championed by Al-Ghizali (2000), and more recently among Rescher (1960), Morganbesser and Ullmann-Margalit (1977), and Normore (1998). Reisner (2014) considers, and rejects, a similar account of theoretical reasoning for self-fulfilling belief.
Typically when we speak of willing, we are speaking of willing for reasons. I act at will, for instance, when I choose to spend the afternoon at the park rather than the cinema because of my preference for the outdoors. When Velleman speaks of believing at will he must presumably have this sort of willing in mind if, on his picture, the explanation of how we come to one belief rather than another when our epistemic reasons are counter-balanced is that we decide what to believe on the basis of our preferences or practical reasons.

But the exercise of will posited in order to resolve practical Buridan cases does not involve, nor could it ever involve, this typical sort of willing. For in practical Buridan cases, the reason a rational agent needs some further mechanism is that all of her practical reasons have already come in to play, and have been insufficient to resolve the agent’s deliberation about what to do. The whole point of positing an act of will is to allow the rational agent to resolve a deliberation by answering a question of what to do without recourse to any further reasons. Such a willing is sometimes referred to as a “picking” to distinguish it from “choosing” which is always done for reasons.

So when we say that we are free to act as we want when our practical reasons are counter-balanced, it is in a very specific sense: it is not that we choose on the basis of our reasons, preferences, or desires – that’s what we regularly do – but rather that we are willing to make that action the one that we prefer. Thus even if we could will to believe what we want in this special sense when our epistemic reasons permit belief in either of two contrary propositions, it would not amount to believing at will, at least in the familiar sense where we decide what to believe directly on the basis of practical considerations. We could not exercise this power to believe that we will be a millionaire for the reason that we would like to be a millionaire, because this would be an act of choosing what to believe for reasons.

So if cases of epistemic permissivism would allow for the possibility of believing at will, it would not be the kind of familiar believing at will, on the basis of practical reasons. But by thinking about what a theoretical analogue of picking would have to be like, we can also see that an act of will could never be the right kind of capacity to help an agent resolve an epistemic Buridan case. No power of the will, with our beliefs as object, could help resolve the Buridan-problem in which cases of epistemic permissivism place an epistemic agent.

We can see this by thinking about what a resolution to a Buridan problem must involve. Consider first the situation of the practical agent. A rational agent, engaged in practical reasoning about what to do, should be able arrive at a decision, and so act or intend. Often such an agent can accomplish this by weighing her respective reasons for acting. In practical Buridan cases, the agent faces a problem. Since her reasons are sufficient for two different actions, she requires some further capacity to resolve her otherwise intractable deliberation about what to do, and come to a decision about how to act. A power of the will to pick how to act, without picking for further reasons, would be the right kind of power to solve the problem. So willing would help a rational agent conclude her practical deliberation, allowing her to come to a decision about how to act.

Epistemic Buridan cases, in contrast, involve a rational epistemic agent, engaged in theoretical deliberation, who needs to resolve her reasoning about what is so and thereby come to some doxastic attitude. Often, an agent can accomplish this by weighing her respective reasons for believing. In epistemic Buridan cases, since her reasons are sufficient for two different doxastic attitudes, she would require some further capacity to resolve her theoretical deliberation and so come to a belief about what is so.
It may seem as though a power of the will to pick what to believe, without believing for further reasons, could be the right kind of power to resolve such an intractable theoretical deliberation, just as a power of the will to pick what to do can resolve an intractable practical deliberation. Thinking carefully about what is needed to resolve a theoretical deliberation, however, reveals such a capacity to be inadequate.

We can see why this is so by again distinguishing carefully between acquiring a true belief in some proposition and concluding some proposition true. Theoretical reasoning, insofar as it is reasoning about what is so, requires, for its resolution, the latter. And so if we need to posit an extra power to resolve an otherwise intractable theoretical deliberation, it will need to be a power which allows us to conclude that p is so.

But a power to will yourself to have one belief or another – even a power to will yourself to have one of what you know would be two true beliefs – is simply the wrong kind of power to effect such a resolution. Exercising such a power does not resolve your theoretical deliberation, it circumvents it.

To resolve your theoretical deliberation, you would need a power, not to will one belief or another, but rather to take a proposition or its negation as true. For it is only by taking a proposition or its negation as true that an agent will have done something amounting to determining whether p, resolving her reasoning.43 Just as it is only by taking an action as to be done that we would be able to resolve a practical deliberation about how to act.44

43 An important point brought out by Hieronymi (2005).
44 We can consider, for comparison, the ways in which having a power to form an intention at will, rather than pick an action at will, would circumvent, rather than provide resolution to, an agent deciding which bale of hay to pursue. (An important lesson from Kavka (1983)’s Toxin Puzzle case.)
And so an act of will could never help an agent in such circumstances. For insofar as it was an exercise of the will (understood as a practical power involved with deciding whether to believe that p) it will not have been a way of answering a theoretical question about the truth of a proposition, and thus not really a way of resolving the intractable theoretical deliberation for which the power was posited.45

Like cases of moral ties, epistemic Buridan cases fail to provide support for Velleman’s conclusion. Moreover, this picture of epistemic Buridan cases again reveals a substantial barrier to the possibility of doxastic voluntarism, even for those who find epistemic permissivism attractive.

This is because even a philosopher who accepts that the normative question of whether we should believe that p is separable from the question of whether p is true might still be still be attracted to the view that a believer needs to conclude that p is true in order to form the belief that p on the basis of such reasoning. Suppose we do accept that epistemic reasons to believe that p needn’t show p true (provided they show we will have a true belief that p). This opens up the possibility of a gap between our normative and operative reasons – we might find ourselves in the situation where the reasons which show that we should believe that p are insufficient to resolve our theoretical reasoning about whether p is true. Practical reasons are the wrong kinds of operative reasons to fill in this gap. While practical reasons might be part of a process that causes you conclude that p is true, they would never show that p is true, and so could not be the right sorts of operative reasons to form a belief

45 This argument shows the difficulties in resolving doxastic Buridan cases by believing directly on the basis of pragmatic reasons. However, this does not mean that someone who rejects Velleman’s conception of epistemic freedom must hold that Buridan cases are unresolvable, it remains open that we might resolve such Buridan cases on the basis of some automatic belief formation mechanism. It also remains open that such automatic belief formation mechanisms may be affected by our practical reasons, so that we can indirectly get ourselves to believe on the basis of pragmatic reasons.
that p directly on the basis of reasoning, even when one’s epistemic reasons were otherwise counterbalanced so as to make adopting the belief permissible.

§IV. Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the claim that self-fulfilling beliefs, because of their exceptional structure, constitute an important counter-example to the widely accepted thesis that we ought not and cannot believe at will. I have argued that the force of this claim is overstated. Cases of self-fulfilling belief should not persuade those already skeptical of these theses. Understanding how the claim goes astray, however, requires a close examination of the nature of practical and theoretical rationality.

I have begun by reconstructing Velleman’s account of our special license to self-fulfilling beliefs. Velleman establishes this license by arguing for a form of epistemic permissivism and doxastic voluntarism with respect to self-fulfilling beliefs, starting from views about the role of evidence in epistemic justification and the epistemic sense in which belief aims at the truth typically though to be resistant to such conclusions. Unlike other beliefs, self-fulfilling beliefs will be correct whether they are believed or disbelieved, and so either attitude – belief or disbelief – is, he claims, epistemically permissible. Since no one attitude is dictated by our epistemic reasons, we can choose what to believe at will on the basis of practical reasons.

I have also argued against this account, by considering each of these claims in turn. First, I have argued against the claim that in cases of self-fulfilling belief, we are permitted to believe or disbelieve the same proposition. I have distinguished between two possible readings of the aim of true belief: the aim of acquiring true beliefs, and the aim determining whether the believed proposition is true. I have shown that in cases of self-fulfilling belief, these two aims can come apart. I have argued Velleman’s permissivism is plausible only on
the first interpretation of the aim of belief, and that for those who find the second aim of belief more plausible, there will be substantial barriers for any subsequent attempt to argue for epistemic permissivism.

Second, I have argued that even if we accept that in cases of self-fulfilling belief our epistemic reasons suffice to adopt two different doxastic attitudes toward the same proposition, it will not follow that we can believe at will directly on the basis of practical reasons in such cases. Even if an agent is in a position where a belief that \( p \) and a belief that \( \neg p \) would both be correct, she still needs some mechanism by which she arrives at one belief rather than the other. If this mechanism is to allow her to resolve her theoretical reasoning about \( p \) without recourse to further reasons, this will preclude any mechanism which makes recourse to an agent’s practical reasons for believing.
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