

# Is Weak Assent Supposition?

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## ***Abstract:***

The Pyrrhonian sceptics appear to have advanced a distinction between two kinds of propositional attitude, *weak assent* and *strong assent*. While strong assent is usually taken to be a species of belief, scholars have struggled to determine what sort of attitude weak assent could be. This struggle arises because, on the one hand, weak assent must have certain important features of belief, while on the other, weak assent cannot be a kind of belief without undermining the sceptic's position. This tension invites one to ask whether there is a coherent distinction to be made at all. This paper (partially) explores whether there is. In the paper I begin by making a motivated assumption that weak assent is not belief. As there are interesting similarities between weak assent and supposition, I then examine to what degree a case can be made that weak assent is a kind of supposition. As a consequence, some large portions of the paper will be devoted to examining in detail the nature of supposition. In light of this examination, we shall see whether our understanding of supposition can be made to accommodate certain features of weak assent. David Velleman's insightful views on belief and other propositional attitudes will prove useful to have on hand throughout the discussion, so I shall stop at various points in the paper to articulate the relevant view. The result of the paper will be that, after a promising start, weak assent cannot plausibly be understood as a kind of supposition.

## 1 Introduction

The Pyrrhonists are often credited with holding the view, put crudely, that one should suspend judgment about everything. For any proposition  $p$  that one encounters, one will find, ready to hand, reasons of equal cogency for believing  $p$  and its negation. So, the sceptic concludes, one should suspend judgment ( $\epsilon\pi\epsilon\chi\omega$ ) from  $p$  (and from the negation of  $p$ ). As Sextus Empiricus claims (PH 1.12): "The chief constitutive principle of scepticism is the claim that to every account an equal account is opposed; for it is from this, we think, that we come to hold no beliefs."

If this is true, two problems emerge for the sceptic. Firstly, the sceptic faces inconsistency: his view that one should suspend judgment about any proposition is itself a proposition, a proposition the sceptic seems to endorse. So if the sceptic wishes

to believe that one should always suspend judgment, he is inconsistent. Secondly, the sceptic's advocacy of universal ἐποχή threatens to doom him to inactivity (ἀπραξία). On most views, believing is necessary for action, so without belief, the sceptic cannot act. Scepticism is meant to be a way of life, a philosophical recipe for happiness<sup>1</sup>, so it is problematic that scepticism entails inactivity.

The sceptics were not unaware of these problems. A commonly cited solution to both problems is the puzzling distinction described by Sextus in these characteristic passages:

When we say that the Sceptics do not hold beliefs (δογματίζειν), we do not take 'belief' in the sense in which some say, quite generally, that belief is acquiescing in something; for Sceptics assent to feelings forced upon them by appearances...Rather, we say that they do not hold beliefs in the sense in which some say that belief is assent to some unclear object of investigation in the sciences...(PH 1.13)

Even if both Academics and Sceptics say they obey certain things (πείθεσθαι τισιν), the difference even here between the two philosophies is clear. For 'obey' is used in different senses. It means not resisting but simply following without strong inclination or adherence...; and it sometimes means assenting (συγκατατίθεσθαι) to something by choice and, as it were, sympathy. (PH 1. 230).

The distinction seems to be one between two kinds of assent to or acceptance of a proposition, what I will call a *weak* kind and a *strong* kind.<sup>2</sup> There are a number of ways this distinction might be detailed, and considering one of these ways will be the project of this paper. In outline, the distinction solves both problems as follows. On the one hand, when the sceptic claims one should always suspend judgment, he means that one should always withhold strong assent. But it is sometimes permissible to grant weak assent. So the sceptic may weakly assent to his own claim that one should always withhold strong assent, thereby resolving the worry about inconsistency. On the other hand, since the sceptic allows himself weak assent to some propositions, he will (or may) have a pool of propositions to use as prerequisites to action, and hence may act,

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<sup>1</sup> ...the aim of the Sceptic is tranquility (ἀταραξία) in matters of opinion and moderation of feeling in matters forced upon us." (PH 1.25)

<sup>2</sup> My nomenclature differs slightly from that found in the literature on this topic. Key papers on sceptical assent are Bett (1990) and Frede (1984). Bett calls weak assent 'approval' and strong assent simply 'assent', while Frede uses 'having a view' for weak assent and 'making a claim/taking a position' for strong assent. Baxter (forthcoming) discusses the distinction with respect to Hume and uses 'passive acquiescence' and 'active endorsement'.

and hence may live. As Sextus claims, “Thus, according to what is apparent [that to which we weakly assent], we live in accordance with everyday observances, without holding opinions—for we are not to be utterly inactive.” (PH 1.23)

I need to say a few words about the general nature of this project before proceeding. In large part this paper will not be a paper in the history of philosophy. Just as one might explore whether there is a way to make sense of a theory of universals in the spirit of Plato, which nonetheless departs from the letter of Plato, or whether there is a foundationalist answer to scepticism about knowledge in the spirit of Descartes, which nonetheless departs from the letter of Descartes, so I aim to explore whether there is a coherent distinction between two kinds of assent in the spirit of Sextus, though I may not adhere to the letter of Sextus. So while I will be constrained by certain broad textual and doctrinal parameters drawn from Sextus, I will not engage in detailed textual analysis, or try to determine what view Sextus really held. I will attribute a view to Sextus, and try to see if general philosophical sense can be made of this view.

Why should such a project hold interest for anyone, the historian or non-historian alike, one might ask? For the historian, we can say the following. One of the tasks of the historian of philosophy is to explain, to himself and to other philosophers (historians or not), what historical philosophers thought, i.e., what was the philosophical content of their claims. The historian should present these views as coherent views, if there is reason to think the views are coherent. Sometimes there will not be sufficient textual evidence to decide. In such cases, it is incumbent on the historian to determine whether a coherent version of the view is available; if there is not one, the historian is no longer under obligation to present a historical view as a coherent view. Now there are various obstacles to drawing the distinction between two kinds of assent coherently. This paper will be an attempt to determine whether some of these obstacles are surmountable.

That covers the historian, but what about the non-historian? As we shall see, making sense of this distinction will take us into the domain of various issues of contemporary debate, like doxastic voluntarism and the motivational role of belief. We shall have reason to scrutinize our understanding of supposition, which may reveal interesting things about it that may have been unnoticed hitherto. Moreover,

strikingly weak-assent-like attitudes have turned up in contemporary literature. Most notably, Michael Bratman (1992) has argued for an attitude he calls ‘acceptance in a context’, which he thinks of as lying somewhere between belief and supposition. Exploring what weak assent could be seems of direct interest to anyone who thinks there are attitudes of acceptance that differ from belief, but are somehow more “robust” than other forms of acceptance, since this is the kind of attitude weak assent is likely to be.

## 2 *The Puzzle: What is Weak Assent?*

I have defined my project as determining whether the distinction between weak and strong assent can be made coherently, and I have called the distinction made by Sextus “puzzling”. But why is it puzzling, and why is there doubt about the coherence of the distinction? It seems clear that strong assent is meant to correspond to more or less ordinary belief about how things “really” are. This is the kind of assent the sceptic wants to withhold. He wants to avoid claiming that it is *true* that *p*, or that it is *really* the case that *p*<sup>3</sup>: “For if you hold beliefs, then you posit as real the things you are said to hold beliefs about” (PH 1. 14). Sometimes, Sextus, in characterizing strong assent, identifies making a claim that something is really the case (ὕπαρχω) with making a claim about “external” objects (ἔξωθεν ὑποκειμένοι), as he does in PH 1.13 when he refers to “unclear objects of investigation”.<sup>4</sup>

But if strong assent is belief in the more or less ordinary sense, which makes claims about how things really are, and takes as its objects propositions about external objects, then what is weak assent? Note this contrast, which is informative about how weak assent might differ from belief (PH 1.19):

As we said before, we do not overturn anything which leads us, without our willing it, to assent in accordance with a passive appearance—and these things are precisely what is apparent. When we investigate whether existing things are such as they appear, we grant that they appear, and what we investigate is not what is apparent but what is said about what is apparent—and this is different from investigating what is apparent itself. For

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<sup>3</sup> Williams (1973) is a precedent for thinking that believing that *p* is the same as believing that *p* is true.

<sup>4</sup> It is also worth noting that Sextus habitually associates “investigation” with objects of belief, which stand in contrast to “appearances”. Investigation is usually an activity the sceptic undertakes in order to arrive at suspension; he investigates the beliefs of dogmatists, finds there equipollent considerations, and suspends judgment.

example, it appears to us that honey sweetens...; but whether it is actually sweet (as far as the argument goes)<sup>5</sup> is something we investigate—and this is not what is apparent but what is said about what is apparent.

Some facts about weak assent that emerge here and in the other passages we have seen are these. Weak assent is an attitude taken toward “apparent” propositions, propositions describing the “apparent”. By contrast, strong assent is meant to apply to propositions describing what is really the case, not just how things appear. Moreover, weak assent seems to be, at least, a matter of passive acquiescence to appearances, and at most, a forcing of assent by appearances. Strong assent is something we do “by choice” and have more control over than we do weak assent. More will need to be said about these characteristics later; for now it suffices to paint a general picture.

In general, weak assent seems to require space somewhere between ordinary belief and suspension of judgment. After all, Sextus claims, “we [Sceptics] do yield to things which passively move us and lead us necessarily to assent”, but “we neither posit nor reject anything which is said dogmatically about what is unclear.”(PH 1.193). The key to making out this distinction is to determine what this space between belief and suspension is like.

Further complicating matters is that weak assent seems to need to be like belief on the one hand, but importantly different from it on the other. One important thing it must have in common with belief is that it must be able to motivate as belief motivates; if it did not, appealing to weak assent would not solve the ἀπραξία problem. Moreover, it must also be the case that weak assent, like belief, in some way accept or endorse propositions; if it did not, it would amount to suspension of judgment, and then solve neither the ἀπραξία nor the inconsistency problem.<sup>6</sup>

But on the other hand, it seems problematic to think of weak assent as a kind of belief, though some have tried (Frede, 1979). The main worry is that belief is typically thought to be governed by norms, while Sextus’s characterization of weak assent suggests that the latter attitude is not norm-governed. We typically think that there are better and worse reasons to believe something, and that believe can (and should) be

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<sup>5</sup>This is a famously cryptic qualifying phrase (ὅσον ἐπὶ τῷ λόγῳ), about which I will say nothing here. See Frede (1979) and Brunswig (1990).

<sup>6</sup> The sceptic could not endorse or hold his view that one should always withhold assent.

or fail (and should not fail) to be justified. Weak assent, by contrast, appears to be something over which we have little control, something that “just happens” in the right circumstances, i.e., when we face the apparent. And even if we have no control over belief, as some have argued (Williams, 1973), this need mean that belief is not norm-governed (Shah, 2002). But if weak assent is entirely a matter of passive acquiescence in how things appear, the link between assent and justification is broken: justification is not required to acquiesce in how things appear.

We might also worry that the distinction between weak and strong assent becomes harder to make out if weak assent is a kind of belief. How do we distinguish one kind of belief from another in a way that does not appeal to the *content* of the belief? By assuming that weak assent is not belief, we can at least find a place to dig in our heels, as it were; we get the difference between weak and strong assent for free: strong assent is belief; weak assent, whatever it is, is not belief.

For these reasons, I will assume throughout this paper that weak assent is not a kind of belief. But if weak assent is not belief, then what is it? In the remainder of this paper, I will consider one answer to this question.<sup>7</sup>

### 3 *Weak Assent as Supposition: The Prima Facie Case and Four Desiderata*

The answer I will consider is that weak assent is a species of supposition. But why is this answer worth considering? *Prima facie*, weak assent and supposition have much in common. For example, like weak assent, supposition is an attitude that in some way accepts or qualifiedly endorses a proposition. By this I just mean that both weak assent and supposition fall short of belief, yet also do not remain neutral. When I suppose that *p*, I treat *p* as though it were true, without thereby claiming that *p* really is true. Similarly, as we have noted, when I weakly assent to *p*, I grant that *p* appears true without thereby claiming that *p* really is true.

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<sup>7</sup> I view this paper as one part of a larger project. The project might be described like this. Either weak assent is belief or it isn't. One part of the project would be to examine the consequences of supposing weak assent is a kind of belief. As I have briefly noted, there are reasons to think weak assent cannot be a species of belief. So assume weak assent isn't belief. Then what is it? Either it is reducible to some other propositional attitude or it isn't. In this paper, I choose the attitude it most plausibly would be reducible to, were it reducible, and explore problems with the reduction. A final part of the project might be, then, to construct a positive account of weak assent as a distinct, non-reducible propositional attitude.

Moreover, it is easy to imagine the sceptic's actions as motivated by a series of suppositions in place of beliefs. When he supposes that  $p$  is the case, his action is the action he would perform were  $p$  really true. When the sceptic supposes there is a chair before him, he takes it to be true that there is a chair before him, and acts as he would were there a chair before him. That he doesn't add whatever else is needed to make his supposition a belief is not a problem, if he need not add this in order to act.<sup>8</sup> In fact, this seems very characteristic of the sceptic: "I am supposing there is a chair before me, and so I will sit in this chair," he says. "But don't think because I sit in it that I believe there really is a chair before me."

If you worry that supposition cannot motivate (we will take up whether it motivates sufficiently below) consider what happens in a fire drill. In a fire drill, one is expected to behave as though there were a fire. The reason behind this is that if one practices what one should do were there a fire when there isn't, one will be more likely to do these things if a fire occurs. So one is invited to *suppose* there is a fire, and act according. The more thoroughly one supposes, the more successful the fire drill. An ideally successful drill would involve supposing every possible event that could occur during a fire, and acting in the appropriate way given that occurrence. A poor fire drill is one in which the participants exercise no imagination, are lackadaisical in deportment, and few detailed alternatives are considered. In short, in a fire drill one aims to act *just as though there really were a fire*: on the *supposition* there is a fire, one aims to act just as one would if he *believed* there is a fire.

One might object that in a fire drill we don't call the fire department to tell them there is a fire, as we would in a real fire. So surely supposition cannot take us far as belief. But it seems the reason we do not call the fire department is that we have a belief that there is no fire, a belief that contravenes our supposition. Now as long as there are no important consequences, we hold to the supposition, and are motivated by it. But when there is a conflict, and the consequences are important, we seem to side with belief (perhaps because we know it tracks truth in a way supposition does not. I will say more about this below). But recall that the sceptic has no beliefs to contravene his suppositions. So there is no reason why he could not be motivated to do whatever his supposition leads him to do. It is only us believers who cannot be fully motivated by

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<sup>8</sup> And he doesn't, if weak assent is not belief, but serves in its place.

supposition, because we have contravening beliefs. So there is a *prima facie* reason to think supposition can handle the ἀπραξία problem.

The consistency problem, too, seems easily handled by supposition. We said above the sceptic hopes to solve his problem by weakly assenting to the proposition that one should always withhold belief (recall we have identified strong assent and belief). Now we have the sceptic supposing one should always withhold belief. He regards it as true that one should always withhold belief, where this regarding is not itself belief. This solution appears successful because the attitude taken toward the relevant proposition is not itself the one forbidden by the proposition.

But there might be yet a further advantage to understanding weak assent as a kind of supposition. It seems precisely what causes us to struggle to make out the difference between strong and weak assent is that whatever weak assent is, it is an unfamiliar attitude. When we introspect, we do not find it with the same ease we find belief or supposition. Weak assent is a rarity in our mental inventories, while supposition is a commonplace. So it would be very convenient, and perhaps satisfying, to be able to eliminate the need to identify a new and mysterious propositional attitude by realizing that, after all, weak assent was just a kind of supposition. So let us investigate whether the reduction can be made.

I will structure the remaining discussion by adopting four desiderata. These are all respects in which we would like weak assent and supposition to be similar: they should have the same direction of fit, the same motivational role, they should be subject to the same constraints (if any), and should both be either voluntary or involuntary. For each of these it will be important that weak assent and supposition are symmetrical. If they are, we will have good reason to think that weak assent is just a kind of supposition.

### 3.1 *Desideratum 1: Direction of Fit*

A basic way of distinguishing some propositional attitudes from others is by what is sometimes called *direction of fit*. A nice way to illustrate what this difference amounts to is to compare belief and desire. As Velleman (2000) puts it: ‘The former attitude [belief] treats *p* as a report of how things are, whereas the latter treats *p* as a mandate

for how things are to become' (p. 182). Of course, this doesn't mean things really are as *p* reports, or really will become as *p* claims: beliefs can be false and desires can be unfulfilled. The point is that the attitude we adopt toward *p* takes or regards *p* as a report if the attitude is belief, and regards *p* as a mandate if the attitude is desire.

Now it seems there are several attitudes that have the same direction of fit as belief: assumption, imagining, and supposition among them. None of these are attitudes that seem to mandate that anything be made the case. Rather, these attitudes treat propositions as if they represented states of affairs, as reports of how the world is. When I imagine that *p*, I imagine that *p* were the case; when I suppose that *p*, I suppose that *p* were the case. Just as the report can be incorrect in the case of a belief, and hence the belief is false, so can the report be mistaken in the other cases. I can imagine something false, or I can assume something false, but that need not prevent me from taking or regarding that thing as true. It seems that is just what I do insofar as I imagine or suppose or assume: I imagine or suppose or assume that something is true.

It is convenient to call the regarding as true direction of fit *acceptance*. To accept a proposition is to regard it as true, or to adopt one of the attitudes toward it that has the taking-to-be-a-report direction of it. Now it seems clear that belief has a different relation to truth than the other attitudes of acceptance we have mentioned. It is considered inappropriate to believe something that is not true, though we sometimes do it, while it is not considered inappropriate to imagine or suppose something false.<sup>9</sup> Velleman argues that this is because, though these attitudes share direction of fit, they differ with respect to aim. Belief aims or has as its goal something that other attitudes of acceptance do not, namely truth. It will be necessary to return to this topic later, so I postpone an account of what this means until we return.

We should now note that weak assent also appears to be an attitude of acceptance. When the sceptic weakly assents to a proposition, he takes that proposition as a report of how the world is—when the sceptic weakly assents to 'Honey sweetens', he takes the proposition to be a report that honey is sweet. So we appear to satisfy the

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, that something is false may be a reason for supposing or imagining it. We often suppose or imagine things that we know are false, or at least that we not know are not true, but there is something a little odd about asking someone to suppose things he knows to be true. It is odd to say 'Suppose  $2+2=4$ ', but not odd to say 'Suppose the earth were flat'.

first desideratum quite easily: weak assent and supposition are both attitudes of acceptance.

### 3.2 *Desideratum 2: Motivational Role*

Some have held the view that belief differs from other attitudes with the same direction of fit by having a unique motivational role.<sup>10</sup> On this view, “all that’s necessary for an attitude to qualify as belief is that it dispose the subject to behave in ways that would promote the satisfaction of his desires if its content were true”, claims Velleman (p. 255). Velleman argues that something else is needed to distinguish belief from other attitudes of acceptance, namely aim, because other attitudes of acceptance share motivational role with belief. In fact, Velleman goes so far as to identify having a certain motivational role, the very one often used to distinguish belief, with accepting a proposition.

To see that this is plausible, recall what we have said about acceptance. One accepts a proposition when he regards the proposition as true, when he treats it as a report about how things are. So suppose I accept *p*. What could it mean to regard *p* as true? Well, one plausible thing it might mean is that I am disposed to act as I would act if *p* were really true. *A fortiori* it seems to mean that I am disposed to act in ways that promote my desires if *p* were really true. But this is the very motivational role we just ascribed to belief.

So while it is quite plausible that belief have this motivational role, it seems equally plausible that any attitude of acceptance shares it; at least if it is plausible that to regard a proposition as true is to act as though it were true. And it is hard to understand what else it could mean to regard a proposition as true.

Some might find it desirable to say more here. Velleman gives a protracted story about how an account of imagination that does not ascribe to this attitude the same motivational role as belief does not adequately account for important kinds of

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<sup>10</sup> E.g., Braithwaite, ‘The Nature of Believing’, reprinted in *Knowledge and Belief*, ed. A. Phillips Griffiths (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), 28–40.

imagination, like child's-play (p. 256 ff.).<sup>11</sup> [Go ahead and give this story] To this, I can add a story of my own.

A case of supposition familiar to philosophers occurs during a formal proof. We often make suppositions in proofs in order to prove a conditional or a contradiction (for *reductio ad absurdum*). Such proofs often work like this. [This needs to be clearer. Use a labelled diagram here, maybe?] We begin with a set of premises or assumptions. For our purposes we will count the premises as truths that we believe. An ordinary classical truth-functional semantics will allow us to write down certain lines, and not others, under the premises. We will count the writing down of these lines as actions. Given the truth-functional rules and my premises<sup>12</sup>, I am disposed to write down certain lines rather than others. Now should I wish to prove a conditional, I proceed by supposing the antecedent of the conditional, and using it together with my premises to prove the consequent. But I must indent my assumption of the antecedent, as well as all the lines that are used to prove the conditional, making these a sub-proof. Once I prove the conditional, I return to the outer margin, and the lines of the sub-proof are no longer available to me. The reason for this is that I am *merely supposing* the antecedent is true. If the antecedent is not amongst my premises, nor can be proven from them, I cannot count it amongst the truths I have available to me, i.e., amongst my beliefs.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> A commentator on an earlier draft of this paper suggested that while attitudes like supposition may dispose to do nearly everything a belief with the same content would dispose us to do, there are yet some things we are only disposed to do under a belief. It seems difficult to respond to this suggestion without begging the question against the commentator. A response in the spirit of Velleman would be to say that if one fails to be disposed to do everything under a supposition he is disposed to do under a belief with the same content, he has simply not fully "entered into" the supposition, just like we do not fully participate in the fire drill if we do not do everything as we would were there a fire. But this clearly begs the question. A better response for my purposes is to focus the reader's attention on the nature of the project I undertake. I submit that Velleman has made a plausible case for his view, a case that I cannot rehearse fully here. If Velleman is right, then we have avoided a problem in the reduction of weak assent to supposition. But if Velleman's view is merely plausible, then it seems that plausibility counts in favor of the reduction of weak assent to supposition; for then it is plausible that weak assent and supposition have the same motivational role. If Velleman is wrong, then there is a reason to doubt that weak assent is supposition. But as we shall see, there is a more serious reason to doubt this, so if Velleman is wrong, the result of the project is not altered.

<sup>12</sup> It is questionable whether we should think of the truth-functional rules as desires. Here is why we might. Just as desires tell us what we should do, given we have beliefs that allow for it, the rules tell us what we should do, if the premises allow for it. And just as desires may also constrain or inhibit some conduct we could do given our beliefs, so do the rules constrain or prevent certain lines from being written given the premises. Another point where the analogy breaks down is that beliefs bleed into actions: line I write are actions, but they are also become beliefs once written.

<sup>13</sup> The reason I get to return to the outer margin with the proved conditional is simply because of the semantics of the conditional: it tells me that supposing P, Q, I have this available to me as a truth because in proving it I supposed P, and Q followed.

Now imagine that we were given the antecedent of the conditional as a premise, in addition to our original premise. Every line that previously appeared in our sub-proof could now appear as a line at the outer margin, as an available line in then full proof. This suggests suppositions and beliefs motivate the same actions. I am disposed to write down the very same lines in the full proof that I write down in the sub-proof. Supposing the antecedent generates the same “actions”, i.e., the writing of the same lines, as “believing”, i.e., having the antecedent in the premise set. As long as the supposition holds, as long as I regard the supposed proposition as true, I am disposed to do everything I would do *were* the proposition true.<sup>14</sup>

Now recall one of the important reasons the sceptic needs weak assent: he needs a way, in the absence of beliefs, to motivate action. So it is important that weak assent share the same motivational role as belief. The result of the identification of acceptance with belief’s motivational role is nicely three-fold. Firstly, since weak assent is an attitude of acceptance, it gets to share motivational role with belief for free. Secondly, since supposition is an attitude of acceptance, it, too, will have the same motivational role as belief. Lastly, since weak assent and supposition are both attitudes of acceptance, they will have the same motivational role. And these are exactly the results we wanted.

### 3.3 *Desideratum 3: Constraints*

The next desideratum I shall discuss I vaguely call ‘constraints’. I will have more to say below about what I mean by this. But the general idea is something like this. There seem to be certain constraints on weak assent because it does not seem as though one can weakly assent to just any proposition. Recalling earlier passages from Sextus, there are only certain things I weakly assent to, what we have called the apparent (or propositions expressing the apparent). Supposition, on the other hand, does not seem

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<sup>14</sup> A commentator also pointed out that I am entitled to the belief ‘If P then Q’ after I use a conditional proof supposing P and proving Q, whereas I am not entitled to the same belief if I simply believed P in the first instance. This is supposed to show that I get more actions when I use conditional proof, i.e., when I suppose. But it seems all that is important is that the class of actions I get with supposition is the *at least* the same size as the class of actions I get with belief. It is true, that if the commentator is correct, belief and supposition could have the *same* motivational role, but I could do everything under supposition I can do under belief. And it seems this is what is important for the thesis that weak assent is supposition. But it is more intuitive that, if supposition and belief differ with regard to motivational role, one can do less under supposition than under belief. So in arguing that the two attitudes have the same motivational role, I tacitly ruled out, as I think Velleman does, that suppositions give more actions than belief.

subject to similar constraints. One can apparently suppose anything one likes, whether it be true, false, plausible, apparent, or otherwise. So we appear to have an obstacle to taking weak assent to be a kind of supposition: asymmetry with respect to constraints.

In the following section, I will examine more closely whether there are any constraints on supposition, and if there are, can they be understood to be like the constraints on weak assent. In order to this, I will need to draw further contrasts between supposition and belief. But to begin, I will again follow Velleman, and use the notion of a constitutive aim or goal to add substance to the notion of a constraint.

### 3.3.1 *Constitutive Aim*

It is a commonly held view that belief is constrained in some way, i.e., that it is better to believe some propositions than others. More specifically, we generally think that we should not believe false propositions. Moreover, there is often a constraint on belief pertaining to belief formation, i.e., that beliefs not arrived at in a certain way (e.g., through proper appreciation of evidence) are worse than ones that are. It is tempting to think of these constraints as norms. Velleman argues that belief is constrained in a more fundamental, non-normative way, a way which then gives rise to the normativity often associated with belief.

A slogan often associated with belief, thanks to Bernard Williams (1973), is that belief *aims at truth*. Very generally, this means that belief is an attitude that is meant to be adopted only toward true propositions. Velleman takes aiming at truth to be a *constitutive* aim of belief. It is constitutive in that any attitude that does not aim at truth is not belief; as Velleman puts it: ‘to believe something is to accept<sup>15</sup> it with the aim of doing so only if it really is true’ (p. 184). Now this aim need not be agential, that is, it need not be an aim entertained and adopted deliberately by an agent, though it may be.<sup>16</sup> To see how a non-agential aim might work, Velleman makes use of an analogy. It is an aim of certain physiological processes that they achieve certain ends,

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<sup>15</sup> The sense of ‘accept’ here is the technical one we gave under Desideratum I, essentially to regard as true.

<sup>16</sup> The account is intended to remain open to, but not necessitate, a naturalistic reduction of belief.

but the aims of these processes need not be adopted deliberately by the host organism.

Says Velleman:

Belief aims at the truth in the same sense that the circulation aims to supply body tissues with nutrients and oxygen. Not just any movement of fluids within the body counts as circulation, but only those movements which are under the control of mechanisms designed to direct them at supplying the tissues. Hence the aim of supplying the tissues is constitutive of the circulation, just as the aim of being true is constitutive of belief (p. 17).

Velleman considers the formation of beliefs to be regulated by belief-forming mechanisms that are designed to cause or allow beliefs to form only when their contents are true.

If a cognitive state isn't regulated by mechanisms designed to track the truth, then it isn't belief: it's some other kind of cognition. That's why aiming at truth is constitutive of belief. (p. 17)

This does not mean that there can be no false beliefs. A belief-forming mechanism can fail to regulate properly, just as a circulatory mechanism can fail to move the blood properly. That is what is meant by *aiming* at truth: it is possible to miss the mark.

Velleman further suggests that the norms governing belief derive from the constitutive aim of belief:

To say that belief aims at the truth is not simply to re-express the norm stipulating that a belief must be true in order to be correct; rather, it is to point out a fact about belief that generates this norm for its correctness. Belief aims at truth in the normative sense only because it aims at the truth descriptively, in the sense that it is constitutively regulated by mechanisms designed to ensure that it is true (p. 17).

To return to the analogy with circulation, we can say that, given the factual constitutive aim of circulatory movements, we are able to understand what counts as better or worse circulation. Once we understand the aim of circulatory movements, we can begin to prescribe certain practices that will improve circulation (exercise, cholesterol reduction). Similarly, it seems only in light of the factual aim of belief-forming mechanisms can we articulate norms governing belief. We can understand what propositions we should believe in light of what kind of attitude belief is: one that aims at truth. We can understand better or worse ways of arriving at belief in light of

how belief-forming mechanisms work; once we understand that these mechanisms aim to track truth, by further understanding how they seem to do this, we can then articulate what count as good circumstances for believing a proposition, i.e., those that favor the proposition's being true. Once we begin to intentionally regulate belief formation, the constraints on belief become norms.

### 3.3.2 *Constraints on Supposition*

We noted earlier that belief and supposition shared the same direction of fit, and also that a good case could be made they shared the same motivational role. So what distinguishes belief from supposition? Velleman argues that it is constitutive aim. Belief aims to regard a proposition as true only if it really is. But clearly supposition has no such aim: we can suppose a proposition that is false, and it is no demerit to the supposition that the proposition is false. Finding out a proposition is false will count as a reason for abandoning a belief in that proposition, while finding out a proposition is false is no reason to refuse to suppose it.

So belief aims at truth, while supposition does not. In this way, we can understand what it means for there to be constraints on truth that are not on supposition; we can explain why we believe (and should believe) some propositions and not others, while it is not the case we suppose (or should suppose) some propositions and not others, under the same circumstances.

But this leads one to ask: are there *no* constraints on supposition? Suppositions are not limited to propositions one hopes are true, certainly, but does that mean supposition is not limited in any way? And if it is limited, are these limitations derived from some constitutive aim?

I would now like to suggest that there are some constraints on supposition. I will propose a two-tiered account of these constraints: there will be a general tier and a particular tier. I should note at the start that the general tier of constraints will be the more controversial, though it will nicely link its constraints to a constitutive goal. On the other hand, the particular tier of constraints will be more plausible, but there will be greater difficulty in seeing how these derive from a constitutive aim.

### *The General Tier*

To see why there are limitations on supposition, consider a basic, obvious fact about supposition: we typically suppose with some end in mind, for some purpose or reason. For example, I may suppose  $p$  in order to show that *if  $p$ , then  $q$* . Or I may suppose it will rain because if I do, I will take my umbrella. If I take my umbrella, I will achieve the (standing) aim of not getting wet, if it does rain. It is tempting to use this fact about supposition to support this claim: generally, supposition aids in the achievement of some practical end. If this were true, we could think of the achievement of a practical end as something like the aim of supposition. It would be an aim, like the aim of belief, in that a supposition could fail to aid in achieving the end. But just as belief is supposed to track the truth, we might say supposition is supposed to aid in the bringing about of some practical end.

This suggestion has an obvious drawback: it is not clear it will apply to every case of supposition, though it will cover typical cases. And if all supposition does not aim to achieve some practical end, clearly such an aim cannot be constitutive of supposition. So what are some *atypical* cases that might be used as counterexamples here? Someone with an idle mind and a vivid imagination might spend hours lost in reverie, supposing things merely for the sake of supposing.

It is difficult to respond to this worry without begging the question, but here is an effort. Precisely because we seldom if ever engage in idle supposition, we seem ill-suited to judge whether idle supposition would be a genuine case of supposition. So it is a dubious exercise to offer idle supposition as a counterexample here. If aiming at an end is constitutive of supposition, then idle “supposition” is not supposition at all, and is no counterexample. So one would need to be sure idle supposition were genuine supposition before offering it as a counterexample. But that is precisely where the difficulty comes in: why think accepting a proposition with no practical end in mind is supposition at all if all the (clear) cases we know of involve aiming at an end?<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Although I do not want to offer a substantive theory of supposition here, it might be worth considering whether accepting with no end in view is more like *entertaining* a proposition than *supposing* it. That would provide a basis for answering the awkward question, ‘What is accepting with no end in view, if not supposition?’ But it would also invite other awkward questions, like ‘What is entertaining?’ and, more troubling still ‘Is weak assent entertaining?’

If we could find a way to be satisfied on the point that genuine supposition is always made in the endeavor to reach a practical goal, it would of course follow immediately that supposition, like belief, has a constitutive aim. Any attitude that was not adopted in order to aid in the achieving of some practical end would not be supposition.

### *The Particular Tier*

While the general tier gives us some sense in which supposition might be limited, it does not yield the more interesting set of limitations. The more interesting set comes from noticing that supposing some propositions rather than others will have an effect on our success in achieving a practical end. Moreover, which end we choose will determine which propositions will better aid our success if supposed. If I desire to achieve a particular end, I should suppose only what is appropriate to achieving that end. If my aim is to prove *If  $p$  then  $q$* , supposing  $p$  is a good start, while it is inappropriate to begin by supposing an entirely unrelated proposition  $r$ . So supposition appears to have particular constraints, and these constraints are derived from the particular ends we choose to use supposition to achieve.

But are these constraints constitutive in the way that aiming at truth is constitutive of belief? If so there must be a constitutive aim or goal from which the constraints derive. The particular constraints cannot derive merely from the fact that supposition is used in the service of achieving some practical end or other, since that would not allow for any differentiation amongst constraints for different ends: any supposition appropriate for reaching end  $e$  would also be appropriate for  $e'$ . Conversely, making a supposition inappropriate to reaching a certain end would have no bearing on whether I have made a *supposition*. I can, if I like, suppose  $r$  when I want to prove *If  $p$ , then  $q$* , though it is not a good way to achieve my aim. But my supposition is no less a supposition because I suppose  $r$ .

I would like to suggest that we bring constitutive aim and constraint together by grouping suppositions according to the end they are meant to achieve. For any end  $e$  (for which supposing is necessary at all) there will be a class of suppositions appropriate to achieving  $e$ ; call these  $e$ -suppositions. Now for any end  $e$  it is constitutive of its  $e$ -suppositions that they aim to bring about  $e$ . Suppose my goal is to

prove *if p then q*. There will be a class of suppositions appropriate to achieving this aim—in this case a singleton class, consisting of the proposition *p*. It is constitutive of the suppositions in this class that they are used to prove *if p then q*: if an attitude is not used to prove this proposition, then it is not an *if p then q*-proving supposition.

There are a number of concerns about this suggestion. One regards the details, which I will not venture to give here. For example, what counts as appropriate for achieving an end? We probably do not want to include only those suppositions *necessary* to achieve *e*; for some merely sufficient suppositions seem appropriate precisely insofar as they are sufficient. But perhaps not all suppositions sufficient to achieve *e* are appropriate; some might be less efficient means to *e* than others, and perhaps we want the more efficient suppositions to be the more appropriate. And this of course leads to worries about degrees of appropriateness. But I anticipate most of these worries could be cleared up simply by giving more technical details than I will here. [Very bad—very, very bad]

One might also worry that the same supposition could have conflicting constitutive aims. A proposition supposed in order to achieve one end might also be appropriate to suppose for achieving a different, perhaps inconsistent end. This problem could be avoided by simply abandoning the idea that suppositions are individuated by propositional content alone. Rather each supposition is essentially linked to its end and the class of suppositions to which it belongs. So if *p* is used to prove *if p then q*, we can affix a subscript to *p* to index it to its end:  $p_{if\ p\ then\ q}$ . Were the proposition *p* appropriate to suppose in proving a distinct proposition, say *If p then r*, we distinguish this *p* by labeling it thus:  $p_{if\ p\ then\ r}$ . It seems some treatment in this general spirit would alleviate the worry about conflicting ends. [Very unclear]

If these worries could be overcome, then we have a view of supposition in which there are two tiers of constraints, general and particular, and the constraints in each class are linked to a constitutive aim. I have only sketched the view, and am willing to admit it may be unworkable. If it were workable, weak assent and supposition could be linked more tidily than otherwise. But a link is still possible. The important thing to note is that *what* we suppose is constrained by *why* we suppose, whether or not these constraints derive from a constitutive aim. Let us now turn to the connection with weak assent.

### 3.3.3 Constraints on Weak Assent

We have noted that, on Sextus's view, weak assent is something we grant only to certain kinds of propositions, namely ones that are apparent. For purposes of precision and clarity we should say something about what kinds of propositions these are. However, I have opted to exclude such a discussion from this paper,<sup>18</sup> mainly because we will need to say very little about what is meant by the apparent for our purposes. *That* weak assent is limited to apparent propositions will provide ample relevant material for discussion, and we will run into difficulties well before it becomes necessary to consider in any detail what it means for a proposition to be apparent.

Sextus's view seems to be that we adopt an attitude of weak assent only toward the apparent. Objects of investigation do not force assent; if they did, the sceptic could not investigate them. Weak assent is only meant to be adopted toward apparent propositions. So in this way, we might say that weak assent aims at the apparent, like belief aims at truth.<sup>19</sup>

Now we have said that supposition is constrained by the aim for which we suppose. In this connection, I would like now to consider a proposal. Could there be a practical end, call it ' $\omega$ ', that generates for supposition precisely those constraints that exist for weak assent? This end would be such that, in order to achieve it, it would be appropriate to suppose only propositions that are apparent, only those propositions to which weak assent is limited. If there were such an end, we could maintain the following, interesting thesis: weak assent is a kind of supposition; specifically, what we weakly assent to is just what we suppose in order to achieve the aim  $\omega$ . Weak assent

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<sup>18</sup> I originally intended to discuss this in an appendix to this paper, but soon discovered saying much about it at all would necessitate an entire paper of its own.

<sup>19</sup> Two things require comment here. One is that we should not think that weak assent is norm-governed just because it is constrained. That we do weakly assent only to certain kinds of propositions can be merely a description, and imply no prescription. It is interesting to note, however, that if norms can be gleaned from constitutive constraints in the case of belief, the same might be true in the case of weak assent. This could be a starting point for overcoming the main obstacle to thinking of weak assent as a kind of belief. But making this case is a task for another paper (see note 10). Secondly, and relatedly, calling the apparent the 'aim' of weak assent may seem a little odd, since Sextus seems to suggest that our assent forming mechanisms are such that we do not grant weak assent mistakenly. Calling truth the 'aim' of belief seemed to allow for the possibility that we mistakenly believe something false. And perhaps this is why normativity derives from the constitutive constraints on belief: because though belief aims at truth, it can fail to reach it. Weak assent, by contrast, may not allow the same move from constitutive aim to norm, because there is no possibility for error.

would just be certain class of  $e$ -suppositions, where  $e$  was  $\omega$ ; things we weakly assent to would just be propositions supposed in the  $\omega$ -suppositions.

Now in order to maintain this thesis, we would need to identify an aim such that the only suppositions appropriate to achieving it were apparent propositions, i.e., those to which weak assent is limited. This would be an impressive (and perhaps tedious) feat of conceptual engineering, but it is not implausible that it could be done, with enough persistence. We can also now see that it would very tidy to be able to make the particular constraints on supposition somehow constitutive, since the constraints on weak assent are constitutive.

Unfortunately, before we should try to locate an aim like  $\omega$ , or further refine the account of supposition, we must note a serious obstacle to further progress; this will then lead us to discussion of our final desideratum. Unlike belief's aim, which we noted need not be agential, it seems the aim of supposition must be the aim of an agent. This is because there is an element of choice that determines the aim of supposition: an agent must choose some end amongst many (and these choices arise from desires and beliefs the agent has), and decide to pursue that end in part by making certain appropriate suppositions. This suggests that supposition is undertaken *voluntarily*; we suppose on purpose. By contrast, much of the language we have seen Sextus use suggests weak assent is *involuntarily* granted. If this is true, it may be futile to try to find an aim like  $\omega$ . For the suppositions we make in order to achieve  $\omega$  will be made voluntarily, while weak assent is supposed to be an attitude adopted (better to say 'held') involuntarily. So the class of suppositions appropriate to achieving  $\omega$  cannot be the class of propositions we weakly assent to, as we had hoped. So we had better stop to consider whether this obstacle can be removed.

### 3.4 *Desideratum 4: Voluntariness*

Perhaps surprisingly, our detailed examination of whether or not weak assent is a kind of supposition has yielded results more or less favorable to the thesis that weak assent is supposition. We won our first two desiderata relatively easily. The third has not yet been won, and were it to be won, more difficult work would need to be done. But it is

hoped the developments of the last section showed it is plausible that work might be done. So for purposes of this paper, our thesis that weak assent is a kind of supposition will stand or fall based on the results of the following discussion.

It is intuitively appealing to think of supposition as an attitude we adopt voluntarily. It seems to be up to us whether or not we make a supposition, and supposing seems to require an act of will: we must choose to suppose. So a relevant inquiry is, when one weakly assents, does he do so voluntarily?

Let us begin by making our inquiry more precise. First, let us say what we mean by 'voluntary'. Following Feldman (2000), I shall say one does  $\Phi$  voluntarily (i) only if one has a prior intention to  $\Phi$ . I will add the further condition that one does  $\Phi$  voluntarily (ii) only if it is possible that one not  $\Phi$ . So to say we suppose voluntarily is to say that for any supposing, we have a prior intention to suppose, and that it was possible not to make the supposition. I will call these conditions jointly 'voluntariness', and say that voluntariness is a necessary condition for supposing : if I suppose, then my action was voluntary. So our inquiry becomes, is the same conditional true of weak assent?

Let us refresh our memory about how Sextus thinks of weak assent:

We say, then, that the standard of the Sceptical persuasion is what is apparent, implicitly meaning by this the appearances; for they depend on passive and unwilld feelings and are not objects of investigation (PH 1.22).

...we [Sceptics] do not overturn anything which leads us, without our willing it, to assent in accordance with a passive appearance—and these things are precisely what is apparent (PH 1. 19).

Remember too that we say we neither posit nor reject anything which is said dogmatically about what is unclear; for we do yield to things which passively move us and lead us necessarily to assent (PH 1.193).

The view that emerges here seems to be that weak assent is not voluntary. It does not seem to be up to us whether or not we weakly assent, and weakly assenting seems to require no act of will. Weak assent seems to take place "without our willing it"; it is an "unwilld feeling". This leads us to think that we do not form an intention to weakly assent. Moreover, there are things, appearances, which seem to *force* weak

assent: they “lead us *necessarily* to assent”. This suggests that when one weakly assents, it is not possible not to have weakly assented. So our conditional is false.

So we establish a serious obstacle to the view that weak assent is supposition: supposition is an attitude we adopt voluntarily while weak assent is not. It is now tempting to try to remove the obstacle in one of two ways.

Firstly, we can show that, despite appearances, weak assent is voluntary. A precedent for doing so appears in the literature on doxastic voluntarism. There a problem arises because, as Williams famously points out,<sup>20</sup> we cannot form an intention to believe, so belief is involuntary. But belief is also apparently subject to norms, and it is worrisome that something we cannot control is subject to norms: ought is supposed to imply can.

One strategy for making weak assent voluntary is to remove the first necessary condition of voluntary action. Here I follow Shah (2002) who uses the same strategy to make belief voluntary. Shah argues that we need not form an intention to  $\Phi$  in order to  $\Phi$  voluntarily. Specifically, he argues contra Williams that belief can be voluntary though we cannot form an intention to believe. Because we have voluntary control over our appreciation of evidence, and appreciation of evidence determines belief, we have voluntary control over belief.

If an action can be voluntary without our forming a prior intention to act, then weak assent can be voluntary without our forming an intention to weakly assent. There are three problems with this view, however. First, when Sextus claims we do not will to weakly assent, it is not clear he means that we do not form an intention to weakly assent. He may be claiming that weak assent is involuntary, *whatever* necessary conditions are associated with being voluntary. So intentions aside, weak assent is involuntary. Second, it is not clear that the second condition for voluntary action does not cause as much trouble as the first. Sextus clearly claims that appearances necessitate weakly assenting (PH 1.193), so it is not possible not to have weakly assented given certain appearances. And surely, whatever necessary conditions are associated with voluntary action, (ii) must be amongst them.

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<sup>20</sup> Williams (1973) argues we cannot intend to believe P because to do so would mean to form such an intention without regard to whether P were true. This is because if we took P to be true prior to believing it, it seems we would already believe it. And we cannot form an intention to believe without regard to truth because belief is supposed to be adopted only toward true propositions. So since we cannot intend to believe, belief is involuntary.

Third, and perhaps most relevant here, is that it seems forming a prior intention to suppose is a necessary condition for supposing, even if it is not a necessary condition for voluntariness. To see this, consider again the end-oriented nature of supposition. When we suppose, we generally do so for a particular reason, in order to achieve a certain aim. If suppositions are made as means to achieving desired ends, it seems we intend to make suppositions insofar as we intend to achieve the desired end. So that we form no intention to weakly assent is by itself enough to suggest weak assent is not a form of supposition.

A second way to remove the voluntariness obstacle is to argue that some supposition can be involuntary, which would mean making considerable adjustments to our understanding of supposition.<sup>21</sup> Let us now consider what these adjustments should be. In order to involuntarily suppose it would have to be the case that, in supposing, one either fails to form a prior intention to suppose, or it fails to be the case that one could not have supposed<sup>22</sup>. Now, to make things easier (they will still be plenty difficult), let us put aside necessary condition (i), and assume voluntary actions

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<sup>21</sup> There is a third way the obstacle might be removed. We might consider the option that weak assent is voluntary. This clearly runs counter to most available texts. There might be a way around this difficulty, though. There are passages where Sextus' line seems weakened. Recall the earlier passage (this time without interpolations):

For 'go along with' is used in different senses. It means not resisting but simply following without strong inclination or adherence (as a boy is said to go along with his chaperon); and it sometimes means assenting to something by choice and, as it were, sympathy (as a dissolute man goes along with someone who urges extravagant living). Hence, since Carneades and Clitomachus say that they go along with things and that some things are plausible in the sense of having a strong wish with a strong inclination, whereas we say so in the sense of simply yielding without adherence, in this respect too we differ from them (PH 1. 230).

There are two ways to understand what is going on in this passage. One is to understand Sextus to be contrasting weak assent with strong assent. But sometimes a doctrine of weakly assenting to the plausible is attributed to Carneades. So Sextus might be contrasting two kinds of weak assent. If the latter is the case, there is clearly a kind of weak assent that is voluntary ("by choice"), though Sextus clearly means to distance himself and the Pyrrhonists from this kind of assent.

Alternatively, if the former is the correct interpretation, even the kind of assent Sextus wishes to identify with the Pyrrhonists may sometimes be voluntary, especially if we take his analogy at face value. For surely it is possible for the boy to fail to go with his chaperon, and we might make a case that when the boy goes along with his chaperone, he has formed the prior intention to do what the chaperone instructs.

But I do not wish my arguments in this paper to rest ultimately on matters of scholarship or textual interpretation. Sextus is the spokesman for the Pyrrhonists, and his writings strongly suggest Pyrrhonian weak assent is involuntary. So I will take the earlier texts as a kind of 'official' statement of the doctrine, and it is hard to make these read in such a way that leaves room for voluntariness.

<sup>22</sup> It is important to note here that the difference between *possibly not supposing p*, and *possibly supposing not-p*. It is certainly the act of supposing that is voluntary, not the attitude of supposition. So an act of supposing will be involuntary if possibly, the act of supposing is not taken. That possibly, I suppose, but suppose not-p, has no bearing on whether the act of supposing itself is voluntary. Even if it is not possible that I suppose not-p, and hence I must suppose p if I suppose at all, I may still not choose to suppose at all.

can be made without forming a prior intention. We have now only to show that we sometimes suppose in violation of (ii) to show that some supposition can be involuntary.

Now for the same reasons it was difficult to decide whether acceptances made with no practical end in mind were genuine suppositions, it will be difficult to decide the voluntariness issue by appealing to clear examples of supposition: there seem to be no clear examples ready to hand. Paradigm cases of supposition are cases of voluntary supposition. So I will propose a schema for how involuntary supposition would need to work, and test this schema for conceptual coherence.

To begin, let us define an *initial supposition*. By this I mean a supposition that is not a consequence of any prior supposition. We can further define a *consequent supposition* as a supposition that arises as a consequence of prior supposition. I submit that the best way to try to show the existence of involuntary supposition is to assume that involuntary supposition is consequent supposition. We can define a relation between an initial and a consequent supposition as follows. Let  $p$  be the content of an initial supposition, supposed by A. Now let it be the case that there is a second proposition  $q$ , such that  $q$  must be supposed by A whenever  $p$  is. The connection between  $p$  (or between  $p$ 's being supposed) and  $q$  (or  $q$ 's being supposed) must be such that  $q$  is necessarily supposed if  $p$  is. This will violate necessary condition (ii) and yield an involuntary supposition. If we can make sense of such a connection, we can make sense of involuntary supposition.

It is difficult to understand what kind of connection could make this strategy work, however. There are two approaches we could take. One would be to specify a connection between the *propositional content* of an initial supposition and the *propositional content* of a consequent supposition. For example, we might try to claim voluntarily supposing it is raining means involuntarily supposing it is cloudy, because it cannot be raining without being cloudy. Now one type of connection that might give us the kind of necessity we need is entailment. But the connection cannot be entailment between the two propositions, for the same reasons we should not say one believes what is entailed by one's beliefs. For example, Russell believed the Peano axioms (in 1918). The Peano axioms entail Gödel's theorems. But it is not the case that

Russell believed Gödel's theorems (in 1918). Similarly, if one supposes the Peano axioms, he does not thereby suppose Gödel's theorems.

It is hard to see what kind of relation between propositions could give us the kind of necessity we need if we rule out entailment. But even if we could specify such a relation, there is a concern that I think rules out any relation between propositions doing the relevant work. The consideration is this. Any time the truth of one proposition necessitates the truth of a second, we can, it seems, assert a conditional involving both propositions. If  $q$  is true whenever  $p$  is, it is true that *If  $p$  then  $q$* . So it seems that whenever we have a pair of propositions that fit the supposition schema above on account of their respective contents, there will be a true conditional involving the pair of propositions: the proposition initially supposed will be the antecedent of the conditional, and the proposition consequently supposed (naturally enough) will be the consequent.

Now a plausible way to understand conditionals, put forward by Edgington (1995), is that they express an assertion under a supposition. That is, *If  $p$  then  $q$*  asserts  $q$  under the supposition that  $p$ . What we want for involuntary supposition is that, after an initial supposition, a second consequent supposition follows necessarily. But if Edgington is right, our consequent supposition will not be a supposition at all, but an assertion (under a supposition). What we want is two suppositions. But we only get one, the initial voluntary one.

So we should next consider if we can make sense of the relevant connection another way. Maybe the connection is not between propositional contents of suppositions, but between the acts of supposing themselves. Perhaps A, under hypnosis, was told that whenever he supposed  $p$ , he would also suppose  $q$ . Or, perhaps A has somehow (cf. Hume) become conditioned to suppose  $q$  whenever he supposed  $p$ . However odd these cases might be, they would do the work we need them to do. Conditioned responses are generally considered involuntary.

But we now face a very strange and contorted understanding of weak assent. Let us grant that weak assent is involuntary, and that weak assent is a kind of supposition. The only kind of involuntary supposition we can make sense of is one in which the involuntary suppositions are conditioned responses to prior supposings. So all weak assent would have to be a conditioned response to prior supposition.

We have certainly, with this view, departed from the letter of Sextus; it would be hard to find evidence Sextus thought this is what happened when the sceptic weakly assented. But, much worse for this project, we may have departed from the spirit of Sextus as well. Is this the kind of attitude, even more or less, that Sextus had in mind?

A damning consideration seems to be this. Recall a principal reason the sceptic needs a notion like weak assent: he needs an attitude of acceptance to act as surrogate for belief with respect to motivation. The sceptic needs to be able to function more or less normally, and as others who hold beliefs do, but not himself hold beliefs. If weak assent is necessary for action, then on the view we end up with here, the sceptic must first make suppositions before he can perform any action, because he must make suppositions before he can weakly assent. Not only that, but he must also somehow become conditioned so that when he makes certain suppositions, he then involuntarily makes further suppositions, which are the weak assents he needs to act.

This seems to result in a troubling redundancy of causes for action. Weak assent is supposed to do the work of belief in motivating action. But on the view in question, where one belief is required for action, two suppositions are required, an initial one and a consequent weak assent. And this invites us to ask why both suppositions are required. If supposition shares motivational role with belief, why should the sceptic go to the trouble of conditioning himself to make involuntary suppositions in order to act? Why would the sceptic not simply adopt the initial supposition he needed to generate the action he desired to perform, and not bother with the consequent supposition at all? A successful reduction of weak assent to supposition it seems ought to make weak assent directly responsible for action, as belief is; there should be something special about the way we suppose, or what we suppose, that leads to certain actions. But we do not seem to have that here. Instead we have layers of arbitrarily connected supposition.

So though we have gone to great lengths to gain desideratum 4, it appears we have been unsuccessful. It is hard to understand how weak assent can be voluntary, or supposition involuntary.

*Conclusion*

There is not much to say by way of summing up. Had we been able to make some supposition involuntary, it would have been necessary to return to desideratum 3, and see how this result would have affected our account of supposition. Had we been able to make weak assent voluntary, further refining of the account of supposition might have completed a satisfactory reduction of weak assent. But in light of failure to accomplish the latter, achieving desideratum 3 seems hopeless: any suppositions we employ in the service of achieving any end at all will be voluntarily employed, and so none of these can be weak assents.

That weak assent was like supposition in at least two important respects, however, suggests that it might be promising to think of a non-reductive account of weak assent, one which treats weak assent as an attitude of acceptance, rather than one which treats it a species of belief.

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