1. INTRODUCTION

Proponents of the “Belief in Ability Thesis” (BAT) maintain that one deliberates about whether to perform a given action only if one believes that one can perform the action in question. In An Essay on Free Will, Peter van Inwagen endorsed BAT and deployed it in an argument for the incompatibility of deliberation and consistent belief in the nonexistence of free will. Van Inwagen’s argument attracted considerable discussion and criticism. More recently, in Rationality in Action, John Searle has revived discussion of BAT and related issues. Taken together, these works have prompted a good deal of philosophical reflection on BAT and related theses in recent years. The time has come for an overview and evaluation of some of the major discussions of BAT.

We begin by clarifying BAT’s content. We then describe and assess a selection of attempted counterexamples to BAT. We argue that the examples are not counterexamples to BAT. We then discuss and critically evaluate some alternative (to BAT) theses expressing distinct doxastic necessary conditions on deliberation. The theses we discuss have been proposed by various authors as possible substitutes for BAT. We evaluate the theses and also the suggestion that the theses serve as replacements for BAT. We reject the proposed substitution theses. We close with some remarks about the positive case for BAT.

2. CLARIFYING THE CONTENT OF BAT

In the following passages, John Searle informally expresses a thesis that is at least closely related to the thesis we wish to reflect on:

Consider any situation of rational decision making and acting and you will see that you have a sense of alternative possibilities open to you . . . (Searle 2001, 15)
We have the experience of freedom, we must presuppose freedom whenever we make decisions and perform actions... (Searle 2001, 73)

Peter van Inwagen provides a somewhat clearer statement of the thesis with which we are concerned when he writes that

one cannot deliberate about whether to perform a certain act unless one believes it is possible for one to perform it. (van Inwagen 1983, 154)

Here is another presentation of the core idea from van Inwagen (emphases original):

In my view, if someone deliberates about whether to do A or to do B, it follows that his behaviour manifests a belief that it is possible for him to do A—that he can do A, that he has it within his power to do A—and a belief that it is possible for him to do B. (van Inwagen 1983, 155)

Here is a slightly more formal statement of the thesis we take van Inwagen to be presenting and endorsing in the lately quoted passages:

**BAT**: If S deliberates about which of (mutually excluding) actions $A_1 \ldots A_n$ to perform, then S believes that he can perform each of $A_1 \ldots A_n$.

Unfortunately, BAT does not wear its precise meaning on its sleeve. BAT’s opacity is due in large part to the ambiguity of the terms “deliberation” and “can.” Additionally, both the doxastic component of BAT’s consequent and the sense of “mutually excluding” in play here need to be explained. Finally, BAT is closely related to several other theses with which it might be confused. With an eye toward evaluating critical discussions of BAT, it is important to distinguish BAT from these related theses.

We use the balance of this section to clarify the content of BAT. Our aim is to settle on an interpretation of BAT that can be plausibly attributed to van Inwagen and Searle on the basis of the passages quoted above and relevant surrounding texts. Such a reading of BAT is exactly what we should be looking for, given that our main goal in what follows is to evaluate discussions of BAT that have been sparked by claims advanced by van Inwagen and Searle. Adopting a reading of BAT that differs from the one endorsed by van Inwagen and Searle would fail to engage their work.

We begin with the simplest needed clarifications. First, like van Inwagen (1983, 240) we understand “mutually excluding” quite liberally here: one way for two actions to “mutually exclude” one another (for an agent, at a time) is for an agent to decide to perform at most one of the two actions on a given occasion. Actions may also, of course, mutually exclude one another in more straightforward ways. It might be impossible, or impossible in the circumstances, for an agent to perform both of two actions at a given time. Second, we take the “can” in BAT (as van Inwagen and Searle also clearly do) to express the concept of the power
or ability of an agent to act. This is the central notion of metaphysical freedom involved in discussions of, for example, freedom and determinism, and freedom and divine foreknowledge. We will later contrast this understanding of the “can” in BAT with interpretations on which “can” expresses different concepts (e.g., epistemic possibility).

Two questions will help clarify the doxastic component of BAT’s consequent. First, which doxastic relation does BAT require a deliberator to bear to entities concerning her considered courses of action? And second, what kinds of objects belong to the relevant relation’s range?

We answer the questions in reverse order. The members of the relevant relation’s range are propositions. The relevant relation is that of “dispositional belief.” The following rough account of this relation suffices for present purposes: S dispositionally believes (hereafter, “believes”) p iff acceptance of p is accessible to S by way of a non-generative cognitive retrieval process. Notice that this account treats occurrent belief as a limiting case of dispositional belief, and properly excludes mere dispositions-to-believe from the class of dispositional beliefs. On our understanding of BAT’s consequent, it can be satisfied by (at least) the following three states of affairs or events:

• S’s believing the proposition that he can perform each of \( A_1 \ldots A_n \).
• S’s believing, with respect to each of \( A_1 \ldots A_n \), the proposition that he can perform it.
• S’s believing the conjunctive proposition which has as its conjuncts exactly those propositions which state, for each of \( A_1 \ldots A_n \), that he can perform it.

In short, BAT’s consequent can be satisfied by S’s believing some or other of a variety of propositions which affirm S’s ability to perform the relevant actions.

We turn now to the important task of clarifying the notion of “deliberation” in play in Searle’s and van Inwagen’s discussions of BAT. As Richard Taylor (among many others) has rightly noted, ordinary usage permits the term “deliberation” to apply to a number of different kinds of person-involving phenomena.1 What we must do is determine which of these person-involving phenomena van Inwagen and Searle have in mind when endorsing BAT. Fortunately, van Inwagen and Searle make it reasonably clear which phenomenon they mean to denote by “deliberation.” According to van Inwagen (2004, 217):

serious deliberation . . . [occurs when] one is choosing between alternatives and it does not seem to one (once all the purely factual questions have been settled) that the reasons that favor either alternative are clearly the stronger.

And on Searle’s accounting:

there is the gap of rational decision making, where you try to make up your mind what you are going to do. Here the gap is between the reasons for

making up your mind, and the actual decision that you make. (Searle 2001, 14)

Pretty clearly, Searle and van Inwagen conceive of deliberation as a “trying to choose” or “trying to decide” what to do that occurs before action but after reasons for various actions have been weighed and evaluated (but have not decisively favored one course of action over all others). Present purposes thus require that we understand deliberation to be an actional mental process whose aim is the choosing of an action to perform. On this understanding, to deliberate is to try to choose what to do from among a number of incompatible courses of action under certain conditions. So understood, deliberation is distinct from certain other mental phenomena with which it has often been conflated. In particular, deliberation differs from (what Taylor calls) speculation and inference, and also differs from all other mental processes whose aim or goal is not the performance of a certain action but is instead the formation or production of a belief (which we assume to be non-actional).

Undoubtedly, some theorists will have reservations about the conception of deliberation sketched in the last paragraph. We suspect that most theorists with reservations will think that the conception of deliberation is too narrow. Such reservations are easily seen to be beside the point. Present purposes require that we focus on the reading of BAT that is discussed and endorsed by van Inwagen and Searle. This requires that we articulate and discuss a reading of BAT employing the conception of deliberation put forward by van Inwagen and Searle. Furthermore, charity demands that we attribute to van Inwagen and Searle the most plausible thesis that is consistent with the texts at our disposal. This demand alone dictates that we ignore a number of possible interpretations of “deliberation” that others might suggest reading into BAT. For example, charity demands that we exclude readings of BAT on which “deliberation” is taken to denote a broad category that includes speculation and/or inference, since the claim that those processes require beliefs about one’s abilities is pretty implausible on its face. In sum, adopting a reading of BAT that concerns the phenomenon of “trying to choose” or “trying to decide” what to do after reasons for various actions have been weighed and evaluated is dictated both by our main aim in what follows and by the demands of charity.²

Having discussed various clarifications of the initial formulation of BAT, we now provide a statement of BAT that incorporates the clarifications. Here is a statement of BAT that is somewhat clearer and more robust than the earlier formulation:

**BAT:** If S tries to decide which of (mutually excluding) actions $A_1 \ldots A_n$ to perform, then S dispositionally believes of each of $A_1 \ldots A_n$ that he is metaphysically free to perform it.

². It almost goes without saying that our present concerns do not require that we argue that this van Inwagen/Searle understanding of “deliberation” is the only proper understanding of deliberation or that it is in some deep philosophical sense the preferred notion.
With the reminder that “is metaphysically free to” is here stipulated as conceptually equivalent to the “can” in BAT’s earlier formulation, this formulation of BAT may be freely substituted for the earlier and more familiar formulation in what follows.

Given the many confusions about the following point in the secondary literature, a further clarification about the notions of “can” and “metaphysical freedom” in the two formulations of BAT’s consequent is in order. This notion is an unanalyzed notion of “can” or “freedom.” The proper analysis of this complex notion is, to put it mildly, a matter of serious dispute. For this reason, it would be an obvious mistake, in formulating a doxastic necessary condition on deliberation, to substitute into the consequent of the condition some particular (and therefore controversial) substantive analysis of “can.” We suspect that it is because this would be such an obvious mistake that van Inwagen and Searle formulate BAT with the generic “can” and “possibility” locutions. Van Inwagen, for example, nowhere claims that deliberation about whether to do A or to do B requires that the deliberator do any of the following: embrace indeterminism, reject determinism, endorse libertarianism, reject compatibilism.

Claims that deliberation involves one or more of these further commitments have been made by many philosophers including some who also accept BAT. These further claims, however, are not part of the commitment to BAT. Van Inwagen does reject compatibilism and he also believes that mutually excluding alternatives A and B are both open to an agent only if indeterminism is true. But van Inwagen does not claim that these further philosophical commitments of his (and ours) are included in the content of BAT. Deliberation, according to van Inwagen and BAT, requires that one take oneself to be free with respect to the alternatives deliberated about. Deliberation does not require that one have specific further views about the metaphysics of agency. Indeed, deliberation does not require that one have any views at all about the metaphysics of agency or the causal structure of the world.

We trust that BAT’s content has been made tolerably clear. We now begin our examination of possible counterexamples to the thesis. We’ll focus, in what follows, on van Inwagen’s discussion of BAT and on critical discussions of van Inwagen. We do this for two reasons. First, we think we have a better grasp of the nuances of van Inwagen’s overall position on these issues than we have of the details of Searle’s position. Second, discussions of BAT surrounding Searle’s work

3. It is the generality and simplicity of BAT that lead to what van Inwagen and others have recognized as the widespread support for the thesis. In our view van Inwagen only slightly exaggerates when he says that (van Inwagen 1983, 154) “all philosophers who have thought about deliberation agree on one point” (and then goes on to state one version of BAT). Similarly, Dana Nelkin (2004, 105) finds widespread historical and contemporary endorsement of this related general thesis: “Rational deliberators . . . necessarily have a sense that they are free.” Nelkin furthermore finds this widespread support across various philosophical divides. She finds, for example, that the thesis is accepted by a great many free will skeptics, libertarians, compatibilists, and others.

4. Richard Taylor (1966, 1968) and John Searle (2001), for example, are theorists who endorse BAT and also claim that deliberation requires some or other of those further commitments.
have not yet raised issues distinct from those encountered in the literature on van Inwagen’s discussion. We therefore think that the focus on van Inwagen does not result in any loss of philosophical content.

3. COUNTEREXAMPLES TO BAT?

Recall BAT:

BAT: If S deliberates about which of (mutually excluding) actions $A_1 \ldots A_n$ to perform, then S believes that he can perform each of $A_1 \ldots A_n$.

A large number of philosophers have critically discussed van Inwagen’s endorsement of BAT. Searle’s discussions of BAT have also been criticized. In this section we sketch and evaluate a representative sampling of the published criticisms of BAT. A preview of our results: we are aware of no clear counterexample to BAT.

To provide a counterexample to BAT, a critic would presumably need to present a case for inspection and invite others to agree that the case involves relevant deliberation but does not involve the corresponding belief(s) in ability demanded by BAT. A counterexample could be presented in a more theoretically driven way. In a theoretically driven example, a critic would attempt to provide a sufficient condition for deliberation and argue that the condition can be satisfied without the presence of the BAT-demanded belief(s) in ability. Either sort of example, if convincing, will serve as a counterexample to BAT.

Such possible counterexamples, however, do need to get certain details right in order to be persuasive. Any proposed counterexample to BAT must clearly involve an agent who is deliberating in the relevant sense (the sense articulated in the previous section) about some alternative actions and who fails to believe of at least one action in the class deliberated about that he can (in the specified sense) perform it. Examples involving agents “deliberating” in some sense other than that involved in BAT are irrelevant to BAT’s evaluation. Examples involving an agent who deliberates about alternative actions while failing to believe of some other action that he can perform it are also irrelevant to BAT.\(^5\)

Many philosophers have provided what they take to be counterexamples to van Inwagen’s BAT. We will not discuss all of these examples. We choose a representative sample of four from the literature and we discuss them in chronological order. We begin with Bruce Waller’s early discussion of van Inwagen on deliberation (Waller 1985).

3.1 Waller

Waller begins inauspiciously by attributing to van Inwagen an argument van Inwagen has nowhere endorsed. Reading the “can” of BAT as “it’s possible that” Waller (1985, 48) says that van Inwagen argues that

5. We belabor these somewhat obvious points because the secondary literature on this topic contains so many examples of philosophers misunderstanding BAT and/or misreading van Inwagen’s discussion of deliberation and belief in freedom.
P1. One cannot deliberate about whether to perform a certain act unless one believes it is possible for one to perform it. (This is Waller’s generic unpacking of BAT.)

P2. If one believes determinism to be true then one believes that one’s future acts are inevitable (and that no other acts are really possible).

P3. We do deliberate about whether to perform certain acts.

C1. Therefore we cannot believe in determinism.

We are unaware of van Inwagen having provided anything like this argument. In particular, though van Inwagen has affirmed the first and third premises of this argument, we see no textual evidence that he affirms the second premise and no textual evidence that he affirms the argument’s conclusion. Van Inwagen more modestly combines the first and third premises in arguing for the conclusion that we (deliberators) do believe in freedom.

Though he starts off in the wrong direction, Waller does get to the heart of the central matter in his evaluation of this argument. He says he will focus his attention on the first premise of the argument: BAT. Waller discusses several examples. We discuss only his first two.

Van Inwagen, in an oft-quoted passage, suggested that one rejecting BAT should imagine that he is in a room with two doors and that he believes one of the doors to be unlocked and the other door to be locked and impassable, though he has no idea which is which; let him then attempt to imagine himself deliberating about which door to leave by (1983, 154).

Waller responds that in this case “deliberation is precluded by the salience—not the inevitability—of the conclusion” (p. 49). He continues, “In a similar manner, I cannot deliberate whether to walk or (flap my arms and) fly to the tavern; but I can deliberate about whether to walk or drive, even if I firmly believe that the decision . . . is determined” (p. 49). The case is supposed to be a case where it is clear that an agent is deliberating but lacks the beliefs demanded by BAT’s consequent.

Waller apparently thinks that van Inwagen is committed to saying that Waller can’t deliberate in this example because of the stipulated belief in determinism. But BAT does not commit van Inwagen to saying this. Van Inwagen could agree, straightforwardly, that deliberation is possible in this example. According to van Inwagen, deliberation in Waller’s example would reveal Waller to believe both that he can drive and can walk to the tavern. For the example to succeed as a counterexample to BAT, given that deliberation occurs in the example, we would need to see that these BAT-demanded beliefs aren’t present in the case. Waller cites his belief in determinism as being sufficient for the absence of these “can” beliefs. The belief in determinism simply does not suffice for this. An agent can have the relevant “can” beliefs while also believing determinism. We see no threat to BAT in Waller’s first example.

6. Waller cites van Inwagen 1983 but that text contains nothing that can be properly reconstructed as this argument.
Waller’s second example is more complex but is easier to reject. Waller claims that a more complex example will even more clearly display “the possibility of determined deliberation” (p. 49). Once again we get started on the wrong foot: displaying this possibility is not relevant to rejecting BAT which is consistent with the possibility of determined deliberation. Waller’s example involves a situation in which he is a determinist trying to decide what wager, if any, to place in the Grand National Steeplechase race. As a determinist he believes only one option is really open to him. Nonetheless, he says, he can still deliberate about what wager to place.

We have two things to say about this example. First, once again, van Inwagen can accept that deliberation is possible in this story without acknowledging a counterexample to BAT. Nothing in the story clearly precludes the presence of the relevant BAT-demanded “can” beliefs. Waller again cites only the presence of belief in determinism but this as we have seen doesn’t make his case. Second, as noted earlier, counterexamples to BAT must clearly involve “deliberation” in the sense that appears in BAT’s antecedent. It’s not clear that Waller is talking about this same notion of deliberation. Waller says, in discussing his example:

I recognize that my deliberation process—involving my beliefs, memories, hopes, changing knowledge of odds and jockeys and weather conditions—is an essential part of my choosing among various horses. (p. 49)

This is not van Inwagen’s “deliberation.” Van Inwagen’s deliberation occurs only after this sort of (what would seemingly be) reasoning and inference has already taken place.

In sum, Waller has misunderstood the overall argumentative aim of the portion of van Inwagen’s work he is criticizing. This misunderstanding does not prevent Waller from attempting to directly address BAT. Waller’s proposed counterexamples, however, are not clear counterexamples to BAT.7

3.2 Pettit

We turn now to Philip Pettit’s (1989) discussion of van Inwagen on deliberation. Pettit does several things in his brief article. Most notably, he proposes a thesis in the same family as BAT and suggests that perhaps the intuition leading van Inwagen to endorse BAT is properly taken to support only Pettit’s related thesis. Pettit thinks his thesis is more plausible than van Inwagen’s because he thinks he has a counterexample to van Inwagen’s thesis that does not cause trouble for his thesis. We discuss and criticize Pettit’s related thesis in the next section. Here we examine only the alleged counterexample.

7. Waller (1985, 50) is clearly aware of the response to his examples that notes that nothing in the examples precludes the presence of the BAT-demanded “can” beliefs. After noting this, however, he shifts away from the defense of his counterexample and into a discussion of van Inwagen’s reasons for thinking that deliberation manifests the relevant “can” beliefs. Though van Inwagen’s positive reasons for holding BAT are well worth some attention, critically discussing those views can’t help make the case for Waller’s counterexample.
The example is all too briefly presented (Pettit 1989, 43):

We can imagine an incompatibilist determinist who continues to deliberate between O1 and O2, despite admitting that in his sense one of these options is impossible. He may say that he does not know which is the impossible option.

There is nothing here for van Inwagen to deny. Nothing is this story is inconsistent with BAT. BAT requires only that the deliberating agent believe that O1 is possible (that he can do O1) and that O2 is also possible. As with Waller’s examples, Pettit’s noting that it is a determinist deliberating simply doesn’t block the presence of these beliefs. The belief that one of the options is impossible does not suffice to block the presence of the belief that each is possible.

Pettit attempts to fill in additional relevant details as follows:

The determinist in our example can readily deny both that he believes that it is possible that O1 and that he believes that it is possible that O2: he will say that he does not know which is possible and that he is suspending belief about the possibility or impossibility of each. (p. 43)

It is hard to read this as anything more than the assertion that BAT is false. Why can the determinist in Pettit’s example readily deny these things while maintaining that deliberation about O1 and O2 is occurring? Pettit does not say. We fail to see a clear counterexample here. In the face of such a minimally articulated example, van Inwagen would surely report that if one stipulatively takes away the “can” beliefs in the example, he (van Inwagen) loses sight of the deliberation that is supposed to be occurring in the example. In the absence of further detail from Pettit, we are inclined to agree with van Inwagen.

In his article, Pettit is primarily interested in presenting a thesis related to BAT that he takes to sidestep some of BAT’s alleged difficulties. His brief discussion of the alleged counterexample is presented alongside his alternative ability thesis. We have somewhat artificially separated the counterexample discussion from the discussion of Pettit’s alternative hypothesis because in this section we are only looking at proposed counterexamples to BAT. We evaluate Pettit’s alternative thesis in the next section.

3.3 Bok

Like Pettit and Waller, Hilary Bok (1998) offers a multi-pronged criticism of van Inwagen’s discussion of deliberation and freedom. Bok discusses what she takes to be van Inwagen’s overall position, offers an attempted counterexample to BAT, and provides an alternative thesis. As we did with Pettit, we delay discussion of Bok’s proposed alternative thesis until the next section. Here we discuss her misunderstandings of van Inwagen’s position and her alleged counterexample to BAT.

Like Waller, Bok begins by displaying a thorough misunderstanding of van Inwagen’s position. Bok claims that van Inwagen “has argued . . . that a belief in
determinism... would make it impossible for us to deliberate” (1998, 110). Van Inwagen nowhere argues for this claim. As noted earlier, van Inwagen asserts that a belief in freedom is a necessary condition for deliberation. He does not assert that a lack of belief in determinism is also necessary. The fact that van Inwagen believes and argues elsewhere that freedom requires indeterminism simply does not commit him to the view that deliberation requires belief in indeterminism or a lack of belief in determinism. Bok further asserts that the “crucial step in van Inwagen’s argument is the move from the uncontroversial premise that we cannot deliberate about whether or not to perform some action that we know that we cannot possibly perform, to the claim that we cannot deliberate about whether to perform some action unless we believe it to be possible” (1998, 110). Understanding this latter claim as BAT, Bok has correctly identified a thesis that van Inwagen endorses, but van Inwagen nowhere asserts the premise that Bok attributes to him.

Having at least managed to identify a key thesis that van Inwagen accepts, Bok attempts to provide a counterexample. Reflecting on van Inwagen’s case involving the two doors (quoted above in our section on Waller) Bok thinks we find a counterexample to BAT in a related case. Here is the case:

Imagine that I am in a room with two doors, one of which is locked and one of which is unlocked; that I do not know which is which; but that I do know that the locks are set up in such a way that as soon as I choose to try to open one door, that door will unlock, and the door that I have not chosen will lock. We should also imagine that these doors do not open onto the same hallway. Perhaps one opens onto a Tahitian beach and the other into downtown Manhattan; in any case, imagine that I know which door opens onto which prospect. (Bok 1998, 111–112)

“Would it be irrational,” Bok strangely continues, “to deliberate in this situation?” (1998, 112). This continuation is strange because this is supposed to be a case giving us a counterexample to BAT. BAT states a necessary condition on deliberation and says nothing about rationality. We are unsure why the question about rationality is raised where Bok raises it. The proper issue for discussion is whether this case involves deliberation in the relevant sense in the absence of the BAT-demanded beliefs in ability. Charity suggests that we interpret Bok’s question about rationality as a disguised assertion that deliberation can clearly occur in the case described. This, combined with the claim that the BAT-demanded beliefs are not present, constitutes the assertion that the case is a counterexample to BAT.

We have two objections to this alleged counterexample. The first concerns the notion of deliberation in play in Bok’s discussion. Recall that a counterexample to BAT must clearly involve deliberation in van Inwagen’s sense. The case described does not clearly involve deliberation of any particular sort and so it does not clearly involve van Inwagen’s sense of deliberation. Bok says that the agent in her example should let her future be decided by her “preferences” or “practical principles” rather than by the toss of a coin (p. 112). Reflecting on one’s preferences and/or one’s practical principles would clearly be possible in Bok’s case,
but such reflection is not (and does not suffice for) deliberation in the sense relevant to BAT.

That Bok is not focused properly on van Inwagen’s sense of deliberation is clear from her initial characterization of deliberation. “Deliberation,” she says, “is the attempt to determine what one should do” (1998, 110). Bok’s case, we conclude, does not clearly involve the relevant notion of deliberation. This worry, however, is not our most serious worry. With a minimal amount of tinkering, Bok’s case could likely be embellished so as to include an agent who is deliberating in the relevant sense. We therefore turn to our more serious second objection to Bok’s attempted counterexample.

Assume that Bok’s example involves a relevant deliberator. What reason do we have to believe that this deliberator lacks the beliefs in ability that BAT requires? Given that the doors and locks in Bok’s case work as described and given, as she stipulates, that the agent in the case knows they work this way, we see no reason for thinking that the agent lacks the BAT-demanded beliefs. Bok seems to be aware of this objection (p. 112) but she cryptically claims that the strength of the objection turns on “whether or not my reasons for supposing that it makes sense for me to deliberate in the situation I have described have anything to do with the question whether [sic] or not my choice is determined” (1998, p. 112). Though we are unsure exactly what Bok is attempting to explain in this passage, we’re pretty sure the assessment of the example does not turn on the point. The assessment of the example depends on whether the example clearly involves an agent who doesn’t believe that she can leave through each of the doors. For if the example does clearly involve such an agent and also involves relevant deliberation about which door to leave through, then Bok has a counterexample to BAT. We see no reason, however, to believe that the agent lacks the relevant beliefs in ability. We conclude that Bok has not provided a clear counterexample to BAT.

3.4 Nelkin

We turn finally to Dana Nelkin’s recent and important discussion of “The Sense of Freedom” (Nelkin 2004). To her credit, Nelkin properly distinguishes the thesis that deliberation requires a belief in freedom (in the form of BAT) from the position that deliberation requires a belief in indeterminism. Nelkin also correctly recognizes that van Inwagen asserts only the former thesis and says nothing about the relation between determinism and deliberation. There are many other aspects of Nelkin’s discussion which merit admiration and attention. We focus here, however, on her attempt to provide a counterexample to BAT.

BAT clearly implies that if one is deliberating about whether or not to do some action A, one believes that one can do A and one believes that one can refrain from doing A. Nelkin provides the following case as an attempted counterexample:

Imagine you know that a brilliant scientist has the ability to fiddle with your brain in a way that causes you to act as she wishes you to. You know that
she wants you to vote for Gore over Bush in the upcoming presidential race, and that if you do not decide to vote as she wishes, she will cause you to vote that way. So, for instance, you know that if you were to prepare to vote for Bush or otherwise fail to decide to vote for Gore, the brilliant scientist would cause you to vote for Gore. It seems to me that you could still evaluate the reasons for voting for each candidate and decide to vote for Gore on the basis of those reasons. . . . Contrary to [BAT] you do not believe you could forgo the action upon which you decide. (Nelkin 2004, 107–108)

Nelkin’s idea here is, apparently, that (i) the agent in the example is deliberating about whether or not to vote for Gore and (ii) it’s not the case that the agent believes he can refrain from voting for Gore. If correct, Nelkin has a counterexample to BAT.8

Nelkin (2004, 108–109) considers the hypothetical objection that the agent in her example is deliberating about possible actions more fine grained than “whether or not to vote for Gore.” One way to press this objection would be to suggest that what the agent is really deliberating about is whether or not to vote for Gore “on her own” (that is, without interference from the manipulator) and to suggest that one does have the BAT-demanded beliefs required for deliberation about these more fine grained possibilities. To this Nelkin rightfully replies that the objection has no force if the objector is simply pointing to another set of objects of deliberation. As she points out, “additional objects of deliberation that might be regarded as actions to be done or foregone within the thought experiment do not alter the fact that there is something about which one deliberates . . . despite not believing that one could either do or forgo it” (2004, 108). Nelkin is here insisting that the example as given clearly involves deliberation in the absence of one of the BAT-required beliefs in ability.

Why, however, is Nelkin so confident that deliberation is occurring in the example? In particular, why think that deliberation of the sort specified in BAT’s antecedent is occurring? We acknowledge that the agent in the example can “eval-

8. We say that this is “apparently” Nelkin’s point because there is some confusion on Nelkin’s part as to precisely what claim she is addressing. In a footnote attached to the final sentence in the above lengthy quotation Nelkin confuses matters a bit. In a modest attempt to suggest that her counterexample is analogous to Harry Frankfurt’s well known alleged counterexample to the Principle of Alternative Possibilities, she conflates BAT with a related thesis. Here is Nelkin from the footnote:

My claim here is analogous in certain respects to Harry Frankfurt’s claim to have found a counterexample to the “Principle of Alternative Possibilities” . . . That principle states that one cannot be responsible for an action if one cannot do otherwise. I claim here to have a counterexample to what might be called the “principle of belief in alternate possibilities,” the claim that one cannot deliberate if one believes that one cannot do otherwise. (Nelkin 2004, 126–127)

In an attempt to preserve the parallel with Frankfurt, Nelkin here claims to have given a counterexample to a thesis that stands in no interesting logical relation to BAT. Nelkin’s principle of belief in alternative possibilities, formulated as she formulates it above, is equivalent to the claim that deliberation requires that one not believe that one cannot do otherwise. This thesis (which we will encounter later in our section on attempts to provide replacement theses for BAT) is not equivalent to BAT nor is it implied by BAT. A counterexample to this thesis, therefore, would not be relevant to the evaluation of BAT.
uate the reasons for voting for each candidate” but that is not deliberation in the relevant sense. Deliberation in the sense relevant to BAT would commence only after the reasons had been dutifully (or otherwise) evaluated. Having weighed the reasons and considered the overall situation, why think Nelkin’s agent is then clearly able to try to choose (deliberate) whether to vote for Gore or refrain from doing so? In the absence of the BAT-required “can” beliefs we see no reason to think the agent could do this. The agent could resume reflection on her reasons or speculate about whether other factors she is not presently attending to might help her make a better decision. Neither of these steps would be steps involving deliberation in the relevant sense. Nelkin does not explain why we should agree that her case involves both the presence of relevant deliberation and the absence of BAT-demanded “can” beliefs.

The upshot of our discussion: Nelkin’s example does not clearly involve the presence of both the relevant sense of deliberation and the absence of the relevant “can” beliefs. We find no clear counterexample to BAT here. Having critically surveyed a sampling of the attempts to give counterexamples to BAT, we turn now to various attempts to articulate a replacement thesis for BAT.

4. REPLACEMENTS FOR BAT?

Most historical and contemporary theorists who have addressed the issue have endorsed some reading of the claim that deliberation takes place only “under the idea of freedom.” In light of this fact, it’s not too surprising that many of BAT’s detractors maintain that something in BAT’s vicinity must be right. In this section, we evaluate treatments of BAT developed by critics who react to BAT by advancing doxastic requirements for deliberation that differ in some way from the one BAT lays down.

We begin by arguing that there are apparent counterexamples to each of the alleged requirements for deliberation proposed by the indicated critics. We then move on to argue that even if the counterexamples we offer are for some reason unsuccessful, there is an even more effective response to the critical treatments in question. We provide this response and conclude that this replacement strategy for undermining confidence in BAT is ineffective.

4.1 The “No Belief in Inability” Thesis

Perhaps the most popular version of the relevant kind of reaction to BAT proceeds from the following claim about deliberation:

No Belief in Inability Thesis (NBI)—S deliberates among some different courses of action only if S does not believe of some of those actions that she can’t perform them.

According to NBI, deliberation requires that one not believe that one can’t perform some of one’s considered actions. Theorists who endorse something in the neighborhood of NBI include Hilary Bok, Randolph Clarke, Tomis Kapitan, Philip
Pettit, John Searle, Richard Taylor, and Bruce Waller. Bok, Kapitan, Pettit, and Waller invoke NBI in the context of critical discussions of BAT. We grant that NBI is initially tempting. We also think, however, that reflection reveals that NBI is false. Let us explain.

On reflection, it seems that (what we might call) “double-minded deliberation” is possible. That is to say, it seems possible that one deliberate about a course of action while simultaneously believing both that one can and cannot perform it. For concreteness, consider the following case.

Sam believes both that he can make a much-needed trip to the grocery store and that he can keep working on an important philosophy paper. Further, Sam has considered the various reasons he has for pursuing those courses of actions, and has found that they don’t uniquely favor one of those courses of action over the other. Plausibly, Sam is now positioned to deliberate about whether to go to the grocery store or to keep working on that important philosophy paper. Let’s suppose Sam in fact begins deliberating about these possibilities.

Now, suppose we add to our description of Sam’s situation that he believes that he can’t continue to work on that important philosophy paper. This addition implies that Sam has contradictory beliefs. The important issue at this point is whether this addition makes our overall description of Sam’s situation incoherent. NBI says that it does. We think that NBI is incorrect about this: it seems possible that Sam deliberate in such a situation. The most natural way for this to happen would be for Sam to fail to attend to the proposition that he can’t continue working on his philosophy paper. We’re not even sure that Sam’s occurrencely believing that he can’t continue working on his paper would preclude his deliberating about the indicated issue. In short, we think Sam’s belief in his inability to continue working on his paper needn’t preclude Sam’s deliberating about whether to go to the store or to keep working on the paper.

Reflection reveals that NBI is false, its initial appeal notwithstanding. Therefore, NBI cannot serve as the basis for a compelling critical treatment of BAT.

4.2 The “Belief in Epistemic Possibility” Thesis

Another popular version of the kind of reaction to BAT currently under consideration proceeds from something like the following claim about deliberation:

Belief in Epistemic Possibility Thesis (BEP) — S deliberates among some different courses of action only if S believes of each of those actions that her performing it is consistent with certain other propositions she believes.

A number of theses closely related to this formulation of BEP have been articulated and explored in the literature. Proponents of theses in the BEP family

include Daniel Dennett, David Jones, Tomis Kapitan, and Al Mele. All of these theorists deploy something like BEP in the context of critical discussions of BAT. We'll soon present what we take to be a serious objection to BEP. Before doing that, though, let's consider some initially tempting but ultimately unsuccessful responses to BEP.

Someone might think that the objection we lodged against NBI in §4.1 also impugns BEP. Suppose one’s believing of a given action that one can’t perform it is compatible with one’s deliberating about whether to perform it; doesn’t it follow that BEP is false? No, it does not. If BEP said that one deliberates about whether to perform a given action only if that action is epistemically possible for one, then perhaps our counterexample to NBI would spell trouble for BEP as well. All BEP says, though, is that deliberation requires that one believe of each of one’s considered actions that one’s performing it is epistemically possible for one; BEP doesn’t require that the indicated belief(s) be true.

Alternatively, someone might object to BEP by pointing out that one can deliberate among some different courses of actions while simultaneously believing of some of those actions that his performing them is not epistemically possible for him. Like the objection to BEP considered in the last paragraph, this one fails to engage BEP. If BEP stated that one deliberates about whether to perform a given action only if one doesn’t believe of that action that one’s performing it is epistemically impossible for one, then perhaps the aforementioned possibility would cast doubt on BEP. But BEP says no such thing. Again, all BEP says is that deliberation requires that one believe of each of one’s considered actions that one’s performing it is epistemically impossible for one; BEP doesn’t rule out a deliberator’s believing of some of her considered actions that her performing them is epistemically impossible for her. BEP is compatible with a deliberator’s having inconsistent beliefs.

Having considered a couple of instructive but ultimately unsuccessful responses to BEP, we’ll now present a serious objection to BEP. Let’s begin by drawing out two consequences of BEP. First, notice that BEP entails that one deliberates only if one has the concept of consistency. Second, notice that BEP entails that one deliberates only if one holds higher-order beliefs, beliefs about the members of one’s doxastic corpus.

We are now in a position to see that BEP is vulnerable to counterexample. For it seems that there could be creatures that deliberate yet lack either higher-order beliefs or the concept of consistency. Certain higher non-human animals—for example, chimpanzees, rhesus monkeys, dogs—may be deliberators that have neither higher-order beliefs nor the concept of consistency. Small children may also be deliberators who lack either higher-order beliefs or the concept of consistency. Finally, even if every actual deliberator has the cognitive and conceptual sophistication BEP requires for deliberation, it seems possible that there be a deliberator that lacks such sophistication. If any of this is possible then BEP is

false. In light of such apparent counterexamples to BEP, we doubt that BEP can underwrite a compelling critical treatment of BAT.\footnote{As we’ve intimated, we do not here explicitly discuss every member of the BEP family. However, we think that every member of this family is vulnerable to an objection similar to the one developed in the text. Consider, for instance, the thesis that one deliberates among some different courses of action only if one believes of each of those actions that one’s performing it is epistemically possible for one. Plausibly, there could be deliberators that do not possess the concept of epistemic possibility. So, like the members of the BEP family directly addressed in the text, the lately mentioned one places excessive conceptual requirements on deliberation.}

4.3 The “Belief in Counterfactuals about Choices” Thesis

The last of the three versions of the kind of reaction to BAT under consideration here depends on the following claim about deliberation:

**Belief in Counterfactuals about Choices Thesis (BCC)—** S deliberates among some different courses of action only if S believes of each of those actions that she would perform it if she were to choose to perform it.

According to BCC, deliberation requires that one believe of each of one’s considered actions that one would perform it were one to choose to perform it. Proponents of BCC include Hilary Bok and Tomis Kapitan.\footnote{Bok (1998, 112–113); Kapitan (1986, 241).} Both of these theorists invoke BCC in the context of critical discussions of BAT.\footnote{Clarke (1992, 2003) offers an interesting and nuanced discussion of BAT and several other theses we are exploring in this paper. We regret that a detailed discussion of Clarke’s overall views would take us too far off course and hope to specifically engage Clarke’s position on another occasion.}

Soon, we’ll present what we take to be a serious objection to BCC. First, though, we want to do as we did above with BEP and reject a couple of initially tempting responses to BCC. Recall that all BCC says is that one deliberates among some courses of action only if one believes of each of those actions that one would perform it were one to choose to perform it. It would thus be a mistake to think that BCC disallows the possibility that one deliberate about whether to perform a given action while simultaneously believing of that action that he might fail to perform it were he to choose to perform it. For precisely the same reason, it would be a mistake to think that BCC disallows the possibility that one deliberate about whether to perform an action which is in fact such that one might fail to perform it were one to choose to perform it.

Having briefly canvassed these tempting but mistaken responses to BCC, we’ll now present an objection that spells trouble for BCC. The acute reader will notice that the objection we lodge against BCC below is similar to the one we made against BEP above. This is appropriate, since BEP and BCC suffer from the same general malady; namely, they are both too strong in that they propose excessive cognitive and conceptual requirements for deliberation.

BCC entails that one deliberates only if one has the cognitive ability to handle certain counterfactuals. This seems excessive: it seems that there could be
creatures that deliberate yet lack the cognitive ability to handle counterfactuals (which perhaps involves something like the ability to “mentally simulate” the obtaining of certain conditions and subsequently make a judgment about a distinct proposition’s truth value under those “mentally simulated” conditions). Certain higher non-human animals may be deliberators that lack the ability to handle counterfactuals. Small children may also be deliberators who lack the ability to handle counterfactuals. Finally, even if every actual deliberator has the cognitive sophistication BCC requires for deliberation, it seems possible that there be a deliberator that lacks such sophistication. If any of this is correct then BCC is false. In light of such apparent counterexamples to BCC, we think it unlikely that BCC can underwrite a compelling critical treatment of BAT.

Before moving on, we want to address a concern that one might have in light of our criticisms of BEP and BCC. The heart of our objections to BEP and BCC is that they place excessive cognitive and conceptual requirements on deliberation. One may wonder whether a similar objection casts doubt on BAT, given that it also places a conceptual requirement on deliberation.

While we think that this is an interesting question to raise about BAT, we also think that its answer is likely negative. To be sure, if BAT’s requirement for deliberation were roughly on a par in terms of complexity with BEP’s and BCC’s requirements, an objection similar to those lodged against BEP and BCC above would likely refute BAT as well. All parties to the debate should agree that the cognitive and conceptual sophistication required for deliberation by BEP and BCC goes beyond that required by BAT. Moreover, we suspect that, for any plausible candidate deliberator, it will be reasonable to ascribe to it the capacity to grasp the primitive ability concept involved in BAT’s consequent. In sum, while we think it worthwhile to reflect on the question whether BAT’s cognitive and conceptual requirements are excessive, we think the answer to this question is ultimately “no.”

4.4 An Even More Effective Defense of BAT

So far, we have defended BAT against reactions of the kind currently under consideration by presenting cases that cast doubt on the claims about deliberation from which those reactions proceed. We now set aside our proposed counterexamples to NBI, BEP, and BCC presented above, and develop a distinct and more compelling defense of BAT from these criticisms. This defense is quite straightforward. In brief, it is that all of the reactions to BAT considered above fail to engage BAT as they stand, and none can be converted into a good objection to BAT. Let us explain.

Reflection reveals that BAT is compatible with each of NBI, BEP, and BCC (for ease of reference, the “Others”). Notice, for instance, that there’s nothing incoherent about the thought that deliberation requires that one (i) believe of each of one’s considered actions that one can perform it and (ii) not believe some of those actions to be such that one can’t perform them.14 Likewise, it’s not incoherent to

14. Indeed, this conjunctive thesis is endorsed by both Richard Taylor (1966) and John Searle (2001), among others.
suppose that deliberation requires that one believe of each of one’s considered actions (i) that one can perform it and (ii) that one’s performing it is epistemically possible for one. Finally, one can coherently suppose that deliberation requires that one believe of each of one’s considered actions (i) that one can perform it and (ii) that one would perform it if one were to choose to perform it. Indeed, not only is BAT compatible with the Others taken individually; it is also compatible with every possible combination of the Others.

A critic of BAT who only brings forward some subset of the Others fails to engage BAT. Such theorists challenge BAT no more than do enthusiastic proponents of BAT like Richard Taylor and John Searle who embrace additional requirements for deliberation (e.g., belief in causal and/or psychological indeterminism and also some of the Others). In sum, though many theorists seem to think that calling attention to the Others somehow spells trouble for BAT, we are confident that this is incorrect.

Of course, each of the Others can trivially be converted into a thesis incompatible with BAT by augmenting it with a rider to the effect that “BAT is false.” Granted, such conversions are easy. Such conversions engage BAT, however, only if they are well motivated. We see no way to plausibly motivate these conversions.

There seem to be two main ways to try to motivate adding anti-BAT clauses to the Others. First, one could claim to have an intuition to the effect that BAT is implausible on its face. Even if someone were to have such an intuition, it’s unlikely that it would be widely shared, given the widespread agreement that something in BAT’s vicinity must be true. A much more promising tack is to try to adduce a clear counterexample to BAT. The problem with this attempt to justify adding anti-BAT clauses to the Others is that none of the extant alleged counterexamples to BAT seems successful. (This was the upshot of §3 above.) Neither way of motivating the needed augmentation of the Others seems to survive scrutiny.

In sum, many critical treatments of BAT proceed by suggesting that BAT be replaced by a thesis that lays down a requirement for deliberation that differs from the one laid down by BAT. Such reactions to BAT are subject to two serious objections. First, the specific theses about deliberation advanced by proponents of such reactions seem vulnerable to counterexample. Second, and more importantly, the claims proposed by such critics are consistent with BAT and none can plausibly be converted into a thesis that significantly challenges BAT. The critical treatments of BAT discussed in this section thus fall far short of delivering a good reason to reject BAT.

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

It’s time to wrap up. We have defended BAT from two types of challenges. We have defended BAT from attempts at giving direct counterexamples to it. We have also defended BAT from attempts to replace it with various distinct theses specifying alternative doxastic necessary conditions on deliberation. We found no clear counterexamples to BAT, offered our own counterexamples to the alleged rival theses, and argued that the rival theses are in fact not competitors of BAT because
all of them are consistent with the truth of BAT. In sum, we have offered a fairly thorough response to various challenges to BAT.

We have not, however, offered any positive defense of BAT nor have we more than barely discussed van Inwagen’s defense of BAT.15 We find ourselves tempted to reason as follows. First, following the tradition cited by both van Inwagen and Nelkin (see note 3) and largely confirmed in the writings of critics of BAT, we find it highly plausible that some thesis in the neighborhood of BAT must be correct. Second, as argued in the paper, we are aware of no counterexamples to BAT and believe that BAT’s main rivals are vulnerable to counterexample. Third, as previously discussed, BAT seems to be the simplest thesis in the family of doxastic theses concerning deliberation. BAT is both structurally simple and philosophically simple (recall: BAT neither contains nor requires any specific philosophical analysis or partial analysis of “can,” or freedom, or any other notion). For these reasons we find ourselves drawn to BAT.

We think that this sort of indirect support for BAT is quite powerful. Additionally, we find van Inwagen’s core discussion of BAT to be reasonably persuasive as well.16 Once one is clear about what van Inwagen means by deliberation it is indeed instructive to reflect on van Inwagen’s suggestion to one who denies BAT that he imagine that he is in a room with two doors and that he believes one of the doors to be unlocked and the other door to be locked and impassable, though he has no idea which is which; let him then attempt to imagine himself deliberating about which door to leave by. (1983, 154)

With the proper understanding of “deliberation” fixed, we think one will find it suitably difficult to imagine deliberating in the specified way.

One will find this difficult, but not impossible, we hasten to add. As is clear in the surrounding text (and though he is often misread on this point) van Inwagen, like us, thinks that deliberation is possible in the situation described (van Inwagen 1983, 154–161). Deliberation is possible in the above situation if, but only if, the agent in question also believes of each door that it is passable. This addition would transform the case into the sort of “double-minded” case we used earlier in challenging some of the alleged counterexamples to BAT and in criticizing theses such

15. We find no argument for BAT in Searle. Searle endorses BAT and some distinct related theses and, so far as we can tell, offers only intuitive support for the package of theses he accepts.

16. This is not to say that we are entirely happy with everything that van Inwagen says in his defense of BAT. Here we’ll briefly note two issues that merit further attention. First, van Inwagen leans heavily on the idea that the BAT-demanded “can” beliefs are manifested in the behavior of the deliberating agent. It would be good to have a more detailed understanding of the way that various behaviors manifest beliefs. Though none explores the issue thoroughly, a few of van Inwagen’s critics (Waller, Nelkin) do ask some good questions about the details of this issue. Second, it would be worthwhile to explore how van Inwagen’s older view (1983, 158) that one who fails to deliberate entirely would have “a life spent in catatonic withdrawal or purely random activity” interacts with his view that, at least after early stages of character formation, free choices (which require deliberation of the sort specified in BAT) are quite rare (van Inwagen 1989, 1994, 2004).
as the No Belief in Inability thesis. This is the only reading we can square with van Inwagen’s overall discussion and defense of the claim that there is an incompatibility between deliberation and the consistent belief in the non-existence of free will.

Because we have the “sense of freedom” shared by so many deliberators and because of the indirect and direct defenses of BAT we have mentioned, discussed and defended, we conclude with our endorsement of BAT.

REFERENCES


