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CURTIS BROWN AND STEVEN LUPER-FOY

BELIEF AND RATIONALITY

We have gathered here a collection of papers at a point of intersection between epistemology and the philosophy of mind. The essays in this collection illuminate the bearing of issues about rationality on a variety of themes about belief, including the relation of belief to other propositional attitudes, the nature of the subjects who have beliefs, the nature of the objects of belief, and the ways in which we attribute content to beliefs.

For example, Richard Foley, in his contribution, defends a general view about the nature of rationality which, he argues, applies to belief as a special case.[1] According to his general conception, a decision, plan, goal, belief, etc., is rational if, roughly speaking, it will apparently satisfy the agent's goals. This suggests that there might be good reasons for belief which are nevertheless not reasons to think that the proposition believed is true, since believing what is true is only one among many goals we have, and believing what is false, or anyway that for which we lack adequate evidence, may be a way of satisfying some of our other goals. Foley agrees that good reasons for belief need not be reasons to think the belief true, but argues that the consequences of this view are less radical than they might seem; in general, believing that for which we have the best evidence is the best way to win the pragmatic benefits which might result from holding a particular belief. In many cases in which it might seem beneficial to believe something for which one has inadequate evidence, Foley contends, the pragmatic benefits in question can be gained by epistemic attitudes of acceptance that fall short of belief, such as, presupposing or hypothesizing the truth of the proposition in question rather than *believing* that proposition. Thus, Foley's epistemological view has implications for the philosophy of mind, since his notion of rationality requires a sharp distinction in the philosophy of mind between belief and acceptance.

Conceptions of rationality also relate in various ways to views about the content of belief. On some views rationality consists in part of procedures one ought to follow when one discovers that one has a

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belief that cannot possibly be true.[2] Such a view of rationality would not fit well with an account of the objects of the attitudes according to which one simply *could* not believe the impossible. (Perhaps one could simply shift to procedures for dealing with conflicting beliefs. But on some views of the attitudes, even genuinely conflicting beliefs are impossible.[3]) Also, a related point, such a view clashes with accounts according to which one automatically and inevitably believes all the necessary consequences of things one believes, since in that case one who believed something impossible would thereby believe *everything*, and it is hard to see what epistemological principles would help to correct *that* situation. If believing the impossible merely *led* to believing everything, one might envision a principle for eliminating beliefs which erupt in explosions of further beliefs. But such a principle will be of little use if to believe something impossible just *is* to believe everything. And some influential views about the objects of belief appear to have just such consequences. For example, as Stalnaker notes at the beginning of his contribution, epistemic and doxastic logics have been modeled on modal logic, with belief taken to be analogous to necessity. Epistemic logics have tended to mirror normal modal logics in the following respect: just as, if Q is a deductive consequence of P, then "Necessarily Q" is a deductive consequence of "Necessarily P", so if Q is a deductive consequence of P, then "S knows Q" or "S believes Q" is taken to be a deductive consequence of "S knows P" or "S believes P". Such logics thus have the consequence that one knows or believes all the deductive consequences of things one knows or believes.

It is worth adding that something very similar to the view that one believes all the deductive consequences of the things one believes is an almost unavoidable consequence of some widely held views about semantics, as Scott Soames has shown.[4] It seems indisputable that belief distributes over conjunction, that is, that if I believe that P & Q, then I believe that P and I believe that Q. Now suppose, as it is tempting to do, that "Ralph believes that grass is green" reports a relation between Ralph and the semantic content of "grass is green". Suppose finally that the semantic content of "grass is green" is construed as the set of conditions in which "grass is green" is true – for example, that the semantic content of "grass is green" is the set of possible worlds in which grass is green.[5] The set of worlds in which grass is green is the same as the set of worlds in which grass is green and $2^9 = 512$; so,

if "Ralph believes that grass is green" is true, so is "Ralph believes that grass is green and $2^9 = 512$". But if belief distributes over conjunction, then we have the result that "Ralph believes that $2^9 = 512$" is true. The argument is perfectly general. If "Helga believes that the sky is blue" is true, then so are "Helga believes that either the sky is not colorless or all French citizens are aliens from Saturn", "Helga believes that the sky is not colorless and either the sky is not a solid red dot or it is a solid orange pumpkin", etc. If we accept the argument's premisses, it shows that one believes any necessary consequence of things one believes. Moreover, even without the view that belief distributes over conjunction, we shall get the view that one believes anything necessarily equivalent to things one believes; as Stalnaker notes, this is already quite a strong view.

But, it seems hard to deny, we do *not* believe all the necessary consequences of our beliefs; we are not logically omniscient. Logics or accounts of semantics according to which we are logically omniscient can at best be idealizations. In his paper, Stalnaker discusses the nature of the idealization involved. Normal logics of knowledge or belief, Stalnaker argues, are not best thought of as logics of the beliefs of hyper-rational beings; they are better thought of as applying to the beliefs of ordinary agents, but in a special or technical sense of 'belief'. They apply, he suggests, to a sort of implicit belief which is not the ordinary sort of belief. If I believe *P*, then I implicitly believe anything implied by *P*, even though I may find it difficult or impossible to gain access to this implicit information.

Stalnaker, then, defends an account of the logic of belief which implies that we believe (at least in a technical sense of the term) all the necessary consequences of our beliefs, despite the apparent conflict between this view and natural views of rationality. Similarly, but for different reasons, Ruth Barcan Marcus has defended the view that one cannot believe the impossible.[6] Her reasons have to do directly with the relation between rationality and belief: she holds that ascribing belief in the impossible to a rational agent would render the agent's behavior indistinguishable from that of a genuinely irrational agent.[7] In his contribution to this volume, Curtis Brown defends the possibility of believing what is not possible against Marcus's arguments, suggesting that if her argument were sound it would lead to much more drastic consequences than she intends. But Brown adds that if there is a

subclass of the objects of our belief which essentially characterize our narrow or intrinsic mental states, Marcus's claim that we cannot believe the impossible will be true of them.

Stalnaker's and Brown's papers, then, concern the relation between rationality and the attribution of content. So, in a very different way, does the paper of R. M. Sainsbury.[8] One of the main problems of epistemology is the problem of what we are rationally justified in believing, and one of the main devices by means of which epistemologists have pursued this problem is the thought-experiment of the evil genius who produces our thoughts and experiences in such a way that our beliefs are radically false. The evil genius scenario has interesting connections with views about the contents of the attitudes. For example, Hilary Putnam[9] has produced an influential argument that causal views about the content of the attitudes render the skeptical scenario incoherent. A very different argument from similar premisses to a similar conclusion may be found in an essay of John McDowell.[10] In his contribution, Sainsbury explores in detail the bearing of Russellian views of content, according to which content is not entirely intrinsic, on various skeptical possibilities. He agrees that Russellian views of content are incompatible with a naive version of the Cartesian skeptical scenario, but argues that there are more sophisticated Cartesian possibilities which Russellianism will not dislodge. Nevertheless, these more sophisticated possibilities rely on the notion that mental states with different contents may be "indistinguishable from within", and Sainsbury leaves it an open question whether this notion is ultimately sustainable.

Another contribution to this volume, that of Laurence BonJour, addresses the relation between epistemological issues and the nature of the objects of belief. According to BonJour, at least some elements of thought must have content by virtue of their intrinsic character rather than by virtue of their relations to other thoughts or to the outside world. (This is similar to Brown's claim that there are objects of belief which characterize one's intrinsic mental states, though BonJour's reasons for the claim are different.) BonJour argues that only such a view can explain our introspective access to the content of our thoughts. He criticizes the view that the objects of thought are essentially symbolic or linguistic as being incompatible with such introspective access. His basic argument is simple: if the objects of thought are linguistic, then their content is not determined by their intrinsic properties but, rather,

in some way by the relations in which they stand, for example relations to the external objects by which they are caused under normal conditions, or relations to the way others in the community use the same symbols. But these relations are not introspectively observable. So it would seem that content is not introspectively observable. All that is present to consciousness in thinking is symbols, so all that could be present to consciousness when one has a belief about the content of a particular expression is symbols.[11]

BonJour rejects two possible replies to this argument. First, one might hold that content is not in the head and, thus, is inaccessible to introspection,[12] so it is no objection to the linguistic view that it implies that content cannot be introspected. BonJour's response is that even if a certain dimension of content is inaccessible to introspection, many aspects of content are accessible. For instance, that 'water' refers to H_2O may be inaccessible to some English speakers, but it is nevertheless accessible to them that water is "the locally familiar liquid that appears in lakes and rivers, falls from the sky at times", and so on. (BonJour identifies the distinction between accessible and inaccessible content with the distinction between "wide" and "narrow" content.) Second, BonJour rejects the idea that some version of "conceptual role semantics" can account for the content of the language of thought in a way which makes these contents introspectively available.

Finally, David Pears takes up issues about the relation between rationality and the nature of the *subjects* of belief. A particularly interesting sort of irrationality is the phenomenon of self-deception; in an earlier work,[13] Pears defended an account of self-deception according to which it involves sub-personal centers of agency. On such a view, people are not the only subjects of belief; sub-personal entities can also have beliefs, goals, and other attitudes. In his contribution to the present volume, Pears addresses the nature of these sub-personal entities by exploring the nature of the contrast between his view that they are centers of agency and Davidson's view that, while there are indeed sub-systems, they are not centers of agency. Pears goes on to evaluate Mark Johnston's claim that the account of self-deception in terms of sub-personal agents is incoherent. Pears suggests that, while the sub-systems he invokes lack some of the features of ordinary intentional agency, they retain enough of those features to make it plausible that they are indeed centers of agency.

NOTES

[1] Compare the similar approach offered by Stephen Stich in 'Reflective Equilibrium, Analytic Epistemology and the Problem of Cognitive Diversity' (*Synthese* **74** (1988), pp. 391–413), and discussed in Steven Luper-Foy, 'Rational Definitions and Defining Rationality' (in J. H. Fetzer, D. Shatz and G. Schlesinger (eds.), *Definitions and Definability: Philosophical Perspectives*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 1991, pp. 203–19.

[2] For one example of such an approach see Gilbert Harman's *Change in View: Principles of Reasoning* (MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1986), and the discussion of some of his views in Steven Luper-Foy, 'Arbitrary Reasons' (in M. D. Roth and G. Ross (eds.), *Doubting*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 1990, pp. 39–55).

[3] See especially Richard Foley, 'Is it Possible to Have Contradictory Beliefs?' (*Midwest Studies in Philosophy* **10** (1986), pp. 327–55). In his contribution to this collection, Curtis Brown argues that Ruth Barcan Marcus's views also have this as an unintended consequence.

[4] Scott Soames, 'Direct Reference, Propositional Attitudes, and Semantic Content' (in N. Salmon and S. Soames (eds.), *Propositions and Attitudes*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1988).

[5] Soames shows that similar consequences also follow from more fine-grained accounts of the circumstances with respect to which sentences are true or false, for example, accounts according to which they are *situations* in the sense of Barwise and Perry (*Situations and Attitudes*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1983).

[6] Ruth Barcan Marcus, 'A Proposed Solution to a Puzzle About Belief' (*Midwest Studies in Philosophy* **6** (1981), pp. 501–10); 'Rationality and Believing the Impossible' (*Journal of Philosophy* **80** (1983), pp. 321–38); and 'Some Revisionary Proposals About Belief and Believing' (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **50**, Supplement (1990), pp. 133–53). Richard Foley defends a similar view in 'Is it Possible to Have Contradictory Beliefs?' cited above. This piece is criticized in Curtis Brown, 'How to Believe the Impossible' (*Philosophical Studies* **58** (1990), pp. 271–85).

[7] Since her argument involves the role of an assumption of rationality in the attribution of belief, one might see a family resemblance between Marcus's argument and Davidson's arguments that a kind of principle of charity makes massive error impossible. See, e.g., Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1984, especially Essays 13 and 14).

[8] The relation between rationality and the attribution of content is also addressed in a very interesting paper by Stephen White, 'Narrow Content and Narrow Interpretation', forthcoming in a collection of White's papers to be published by the MIT Press.

[9] Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, chapter one).

[10] John McDowell, 'Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space' (in Philip Pettit and John McDowell (eds.), *Subject, Thought, and Context*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986, pp. 137–68).

[11] There are interesting parallels between this argument and that of Paul A. Boghossian, 'Content and Self-Knowledge' (*Philosophical Topics* **17** (1989), pp. 5–26).

[12] "Not in the head, thus inaccessible to introspection", is clearly too fast an inference;

it should be noted that Tyler Burge, while holding that content is determined by extrinsic factors, also holds that our thoughts are available to introspection. See Tyler Burge, 'Individualism and Self-Knowledge' (*Journal of Philosophy* **85** (1988), pp. 649–63), and compare Donald Davidson, 'Knowing One's Own Mind' (*Proceedings and Addresses of the APA* **60** (1987), pp. 441–58), and Robert C. Stalnaker, 'Narow Content' (in C. Anthony Anderson and Joseph Owens (ed.), *Propositional Attitudes: The Role of Content in Logic, Language, and Mind*, Center for the Study of Language and Information, Stanford, 1990).

[13] David Pears, *Motivated Irrationality* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1984).

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