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Persuading Annoying Turtles: Blocking Conspiracies from Taking our Rationality

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Abstract: Recent work on Lewis Carroll's "What the Tortoise Said to Achilles" sheds light not just on cases where one fails to be persuaded when one should be but also on cases where people are persuaded when they should not be. The recognition of impossibility that Carroll's paper illuminates can help to show what goes wrong with some of those addicted to conspiracy theories.

Keywords: Blocking, conspiracy theories, inference, Lewis Carroll, takings

1. Introduction

In perhaps the finest piece of rhetoric in the philosophy of logic, Lewis Carroll reports on a conversation between Zeno's famous characters, the tortoise and his racing competitor, Achilles. Of course, the main focus of Carroll's paper is to draw attention to an interesting feature of the nature of inference: the act of accepting that a conclusion follows from the premises of a valid argument differs from the act of accepting the truth of a proposition. Yet what this difference is turns out to be difficult to specify. In this paper I will suggest that recent work on understanding this difference might be helpful in seeing why some people who are particularly adept at making good deductive inference are, nevertheless, prone to falling for—indeed, being avid supporters of—highly implausible conspiracy theories. All that is offered here is a hypothesis—or model—for why some highly skilled and intelligent people sometimes go so wrong.

Unfortunately, I am not able to offer data to confirm or falsify the hypothesis or even to provide enough precision to say just what such data would have to be like. My hope is that getting to the hypothesis is reward enough for these shortcomings.

2. What Achilles said

In Lewis Carroll's famous paper, "What the Tortoise said to Achilles" the tortoise wonders whether, when confronted with a pair of obviously true premises and an obviously valid deductive inference, he needs to accept the conclusion this inference warrants. Achilles makes the seemingly natural move of saying: if one accepts the premises and one accepts the rule of inference, one must accept the conclusion.

The tortoise agrees with this, but then claims that this—the claim that if one accepts both the premises and the rule of inference then one must accept the conclusion—is an additional premise that he needs before he must accept the conclusion. The tortoise is, in effect, noting that there is a gap between premises and conclusion and is refusing to recognize that the premises entail the conclusion. The way Carroll has the tortoise put it is revealing, namely, the tortoise says that one could *believe* the premises without *believing* the conclusion. Of course, Achilles falls into the trap of suggesting to the tortoise that if one believed the premises and also believed that they

entailed the conclusion, then one would have to believe the conclusion. This, the tortoise says, is an additional premise. And the regress is off and running. (For then one needs yet another premise saying that one needs to accept the original premises and the first additional premise saying that those premises entail the conclusion in order to finally accept the conclusion. And so on.)

2.1 The Gap

Let us begin by noting a few things. First, we all accept that there is something—perhaps it is properly called a gap—between premises and conclusion, and that it is this gap that is filled/bridged/covered by the inference.¹ Second, we are dealing here with what Kahneman has called system 2 (or slow) reasoning. Third, good inferences tend to preserve truth. They do not—at least not normally—take one from truth to falsity.² Fourth, we all know that there is—that there simply *has to be*—a solution to this problem. We just do not know precisely what it is or how to best characterize what it is.

2.2 The Tortoise and the Turtle

Here I want to consider a pair of testudines whom I will name Tortoise and Turtle. Tortoise behaves much like Carroll's tortoise, refusing to accept conclusions even when they seem to follow from simple premises and obviously valid argument forms. Turtle, Tortoise's swamp-dwelling cousin, behaves quite differently in accepting almost any opportunity to leap across the gap between premises and conclusion. Let us look at how they each react to a couple of common deductive arguments.

Consider *modus ponens*.

Premise 1: If p then q.

Premise 2: p.

Conclusion: (Therefore) q.

Turtle is happy to reach q on the basis of the two premises. Tortoise, in good Carrollian fashion, is unwilling to believe q simply on the basis of the two premises and an inference, though he accepts both the truth of the premises and (in some sense) the validity of the inference.

In this case, we are all hoping that no one will fall into the trap that Achilles did by asking for or even allowing an additional premise that will only lead to a regress.

Now consider another argument, *affirming the consequent* (or *modus morons*).

Premise 1: If p then q.

Premise 2: q

Conclusion: (Therefore) p.

Turtle is happy to accept the conclusion on the basis of these premises and the bad inference. But should Tortoise be inclined to offer someone who rejects the conclusion an additional premise

¹ From here on I will just call it the gap, but nothing hangs on the term being metaphorically superior to the alternatives.

² The “not normally” here is needed because sometimes perfectly good inductive inferences will do this. And there may be deductive ones that fail when dealing with weird circumstances such as some forms of the liar paradox. I leave these vexing issues aside.

(such as: Surely *if* [If p then q] and [q] warrant [p] *then* p.)? It seems not. If we add this to the argument above (and we add conjunction), we have an instance of modus ponens. Clearly, this won't do.

And the fact that it will not do shows us that the genius of Carroll's argument is not so much tied up with the fact that the tortoise can get Achilles into an infinite regress. Of course, unless one recognizes the fact that (at least sometimes)³ when arguments have valid logical forms, accepting the premises requires—rationally requires—one to accept the conclusion without anything further being added, then a regress looms. Rhetorically speaking, the regress is an impressive touch. But the real insight is that there is a *must* involved here. If one accepts the premises of a simple valid deductive argument, then one *must* accept the conclusion—not just because failure to do so leads to an infinite regress but because failure to do so *amounts to* either not really accepting the validity of the inference or not fully understanding the premises.

2.3 Taking

Paul Boghossian has put this feature in terms of what he calls the Taking Condition. He begins his discussion with Frege's observation that "To make a judgment because we are cognisant of other truths as providing a justification for it is known as *inferring*" (page 3). Of course, it need not be truths (or true beliefs) that are the basis of a judgment that we use inference to justify other judgments. False claims (or false beliefs), if accepted as true, can serve as the basis for a judgment using valid inferences.⁴ Furthermore, it may be that cognition is something of a success term (which would perhaps beg or conflate some questions). For these reasons, Boghossian uses the following modification of Frege's original statement of the position:

(Inferring) S's inferring from p to q is for S to judge q *because* S takes the (presumed) truth of p to provide support for q.

And this leads to Boghossian's final statement of the taking condition:

(Taking Condition): Inferring necessarily involves the thinker *taking* his premises to support his conclusion and drawing his conclusion *because of* that fact.

For present purposes, I am going to assume that Boghossian's arguments for this account of the Taking Condition correctly capture what is going on when someone reaches a conclusion on the basis of premises she accepts and of something she (correctly) takes as a deductively valid rule of inference. Of course, the exact nature, the sense, of both the *taking* and the *because* here are very difficult to specify. However, here I will simply suppose (in line with Boghossian's thinking) that the *taking* is full rational understanding and the *because* is some form of rational causation.

3. Taking and seeing

³ This qualification is needed because there are some complex arguments where one might accept the fact that taking the premises to be true and the inference to be valid might not rationally require one to accept that the conclusion must then be true.

⁴ An example might help here. Suppose that one were to infer that Sheldon got his paper to John on time from the premise that Sheldon got his paper to John on time. Clearly, if one accepted the premise, one would have to accept the conclusion. But (as John will attest), while the premise is obviously false, the inference is just fine.

Another way of looking at this comes from a helpful recent suggestion by Eric Marcus. He observes that people cannot seriously assent to an obvious contradiction. No one believes that (p and not-p). No one can assent to the pair of assertions {p, not-p}.

Of course, there may be exceptions. But they all involve some explanation which roughly takes the form of explaining why someone mistakenly believes or assents to something which they really rationally cannot believe. I might continue to rush through the storm towards school to give my 10:00 a.m. lecture even though I have just heard that school has been closed due to the inclement weather. Or a person might fail to realize that the claim they allegedly believe really is an instance of a contradiction. (I might well believe that [Water is water and it is not the case that water is H²O], but this is only because I fail to see it as a contradiction.)⁵ One might have contradictory beliefs about instances of the Liar Paradox or other cases involving self-reference. And the Paradox of the Preface is so named because there is something paradoxical—indeed, something which seems impossible—about, in a careful and considered way, believing a contradiction. Yet what authors write when they say something philosophers count as actual instances of the Paradox of the Preface seems quite reasonable. I will return to this last case below.

As Marcus observes, to fully understand that something is a contradiction is to know that it is necessarily false. And when one knows something is false, one cannot believe it. This both explains why and serves to confirm the fact that we do not know what attitude to ascribe to someone who claims to believe what we see to be a simple contradiction. Note how different this is from someone claiming to believe some simple claim that we believe to be contingently false. Even when we have an enormous amount of evidence for p, such that it is just obvious to us that p is true, we understand what mental attitude the person who claims to believe not-p has. We will wonder why they believe something we take to be so obviously false, but we have no trouble understanding the nature of their belief—at least no more trouble than we have understanding any belief any person has. But we do not know what to say about the person who claims to believe p and, at the same time and in the same sense, to believe not-p. Indeed, when confronted with such situations, we are inclined to abandon belief ascriptions and use medical terminology.⁶

3.1 The Paradox of the preface

Let me consider a toy case of the paradox of the preface. Suppose that our author—a non-philosopher—has done careful research and fact checking on a certain matter. She collects this information into 10,000 claims about the matter. She is quite sure of each claim. Indeed, she would assign a probability of over 99.9% to the truth of each individual claim. But knowing that she is fallible, she writes in the preface to her book, “I have diligently checked each of the claims in my book and I am confident that each one is correct. However, I know that likely somewhere in the book there is a false claim. A reader who finds such a claim should bring it to my attention.”

There both is and is not something paradoxical about claims that constitute instances of the paradox of the preface. The paradox just consists in the realization that there is an inconsistency in believing that each claim is true (and in conjunction, that hence they are all true) and in thinking that at least one is false. On the other hand, the paradox of the preface does not seem to pose quite the deep philosophical problem that the liar paradox poses. Why is this? I think it is mainly because we fully understand that, with larger numbers of claims, the level of confidence that all are true

⁵ No one believes that [water is and is not water] or that [water is H²O and is not H²O].

⁶ We might say, for instance, that the person doesn't mean what she is saying, or that she does not understand, or that she has lost her marbles or has some psychological problem.

just naturally decreases (As well it should. Surely, with 10,000 claims at least one error is bound to slip in. Perhaps a “not” gets added or deleted in the typesetting. Or a “1918” becomes an “1819”. Or something like that.) Note that our author is not in any way doubting that conjunction is a valid inference rule. She has no trouble inferring from the fact that each member of a set of claims is true to the set of them being true. Not being philosophically inclined, Carroll’s tortoise would be dismissed by our author without a further thought (other than something like, “Those philosophers sure worry about weird stuff”).

In ordinary life, we philosophers all behave this way. When we get into our cars, we automatically put on our seatbelts.⁷ But one can think of such behavior as paradoxical. Surely either one thinks that on this trip one will not be in an accident or one will be in an accident. But if one thinks one is not going to have an accident, one has no reason to wear one’s seatbelt. And if one thinks that one *will* be in an accident, one will not take the trip. So either one doesn’t take the trip or one thinks there is no need to wear the seatbelt. But we all do take automotive trips, and we (mostly) all wear our seatbelts.⁸

3.2 Blocking

Recognition that something is a contradiction necessarily blocks one from believing the (alleged) fact because one sees that one cannot simultaneously believe both something and its denial. Let us call the awareness of the impossibility of believing a contradiction the Blocking Condition.

The intuition supporting the Blocking Condition is in most ways the same as that which supports the Taking Condition. In the case of the Taking Condition, there is a *must* which (once recognized) cannot be avoided. With the Blocking Condition there is a *cannot* which (once recognized) prevents one from adopting a belief. But the idea that a full understanding of the claims involved necessarily leads any rational individual to some other attitude is the same. In the case of the Taking Condition, it is the *recognition* that when one has a full understanding of the premises one is *necessarily required* to accept the conclusion. With the Blocking condition it is the *recognition* of the contradiction which *necessarily prohibits* one from believing the contradiction. Fully rational people are, by virtue of their rationality, blocked from believing things they recognize to be contradictions.

4. Mutilating the web of belief

Our beliefs form a web, and a lot of the beliefs that make up any individual’s web are not ones she arrived at by deduction. She got them through other means. Perhaps some are innate, others were arrived through direct experience, others by induction, or from authorities, or from indoctrination, or through clever advertising, or in some other way (perhaps many other ways).⁹

Sometimes this web is disturbed. A new belief—or evidence for a new belief—is such that we must adopt the belief even though this new belief contradicts or is in tension with beliefs already in our web. In such circumstances, most of us implicitly follow Quine’s maxim of

⁷ In this respect we behave like Hume did when his philosophic reasonings produced both melancholy and delirium. Hume turned to eating, playing games, and chatting with friends for relief (*Treatise* Book 1, Section 7).

⁸ One might say that one puts on one’s seatbelt to avoid the probability of a ticket for failing to do so. Fine, but imagine you are in a jurisdiction without such legislation. For those of you who would rather I had virtue signalled here substitute putting on one’s helmet (in a jurisdiction without mandatory helmet laws) when one goes for a ride on one’s cycle.

⁹ For present purposes I wish to remain entirely neutral on the ways in which a person acquires beliefs. If some are spread by viruses or inserted by God, it makes no difference to my argument here.

minimum mutilation.¹⁰ We seek to modify or rescind our existing beliefs in that way that upsets as few beliefs as possible—and especially in ways that upset as few core beliefs as possible.

But Quine taught us—or is widely thought to have taught us—that if you are willing to make enough changes in your beliefs, then you can keep any part of the web you want. Of course, Quine himself preferred to keep things scientific and simple. But at least some have understood him as holding the view that this was just a preference he happened to have. One might prefer metaphysical jungles rather than Quinean desert landscapes; indeed, this is a salient difference between Quine and Ockham. Ockham did not just prefer simplicity over complexity. Rather, he thought one should only move toward more complexity if it was needed in order to handle the relevant data. Furthermore, one can determine whether more complexity is needed when a simple explanation does not contribute to our justified confidence in both the explanans and the explanandum. Thus, the existence of Neptune explains (that is, is the simplest explanation of) the wobble in Uranus's orbit, and that explanation helps confirm the existence of Neptune (and our beliefs about its mass and orbit).¹¹

Philosophers are, of course, willing to entertain the wildest of theories. Indeed, the history of philosophy (at least the canon of Western philosophy) can easily be read as a bunch of brilliant people defending what at first glance seem to be rather bizarre views about the nature of reality. Nevertheless, they all are constrained by rationality and consistency and the need to maintain a web of beliefs that cohere in interesting and insightful ways.

5. The conspiracy theorists' success and failure

Many conspiracy theories are boring. They include obvious instances of bad reasoning or simple factual errors and misunderstandings. But some conspiracy theorists are really quite good at advancing clever arguments for their strange positions. It is this latter group which interests me here. How should we best characterize what goes wrong with the thinking of such individuals? Clearly, they are like neither Carroll's tortoise (or my Tortoise) or my Turtle. Unlike Tortoise they are willing to make inferences, each of which is fully warranted by the standards of logic and critical thinking. They disdain the sort of reasoning in which Turtle engages. One might say—indeed I do say—that they adhere to our standards when it comes to defending the inferences needed to support their strange theories. It cannot be the strangeness which bothers us, nor the quality of each inference, nor the fact that the theories in question are conspiracy theories (for some conspiracy theories are true). It has to be something else.

My suggestion is that it is a combination of being good at rigorous application of the Taking Condition together with a special skill at recognizing and avoiding the Blocking Condition. Typically, when one hears (an apparently obviously false) conspiracy theory, one is inclined to think that the theory must contradict some part of our (shared) web of belief. But the clever conspiracy theorist has the skill to make sure that each step in her theory is supported by an inference which—by our standards—is fully warranted. We take her premises to require us to move to the next step in her story.

But we non-conspiracy theorists see that, at some point, the conspiracy theorist's account is going to be blocked. The Blocking Condition will rationally require one not to accept something

¹⁰ Quine, 1990 (pp. 14-15). Quine seems think that much “is the mutilation the maxim of minimum mutilation is meant to minimize”.

¹¹ I owe the example to Duncan MacIntosh. For the interpretation of Qckham, see Martin and Kaye *On Ockham*. I thank Robert Martin for sorting this out for me.

in the theorist's account. But the better the conspiracy theorist is, the better she will be at showing how, at each particular point where one would think there would be a conflict with the web of belief, that conflict can be avoided. And the better the conspiracy theorist is, the less she has to disturb our web.¹² The trick of the really good conspiracy theorist is to anticipate something that will block her story and avoid getting even close to that.

And this tells us something about the Blocking Condition. It does not just apply to fine-grained individual beliefs. We are blocked—that is, rationality does not permit; rationality necessarily forbids—our accepting an account of reality which requires too much modification of our web of belief just for the sake of the conspiracy theorist's story. Although the clever conspiracy theorist can avoid contradictions at each step along the way, we see that she will not be able to avoid them all without doing too much damage to our web in exchange for insufficient benefit. We might say that the talented conspiracy theorist is able to bridge each gap in her account of why something is best explained as a conspiracy, but that (from our perspective) her account is blocked by the extent to which her story would require us to restructure our web of belief.

6. Conclusion

At the beginning of his *Philosophical Explanations*, Robert Nozick fanaticizes about having “arguments so powerful they set up reverberations in the brain: if the person refuses to accept the conclusion, he *dies*.” Yet even this might not be strong enough, for, as he observes, this still leaves the option of not accepting the conclusion and thus dying. But a “‘perfect’ philosophical argument would leave no [such] choice” (page 4). Of course, most of us, most of the time, do not have such fantasies when engaged in argumentation. But seeing otherwise rational, extremely clever, and well-trained reasoners waste time and energy defending (sometimes with elegance and apparent ease) what we take to be absurd conspiracy theories does help one appreciate Nozick's desire for really powerful arguments. But it is vain to hope for such arguments. Clever conspiracy theorists, like Carroll's tortoise, simply do not see the necessity (the *must* or the *cannot*) which the rest of us see. The best we can hope for is to understand what we see that they (apparently) do not.

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¹² The conspiracy theorist who, denying the standard story about the World Trade Center collapse, begins her account by saying that people do suffer from visual hallucinations is not an interesting theorist.

