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A response to Sheldon Wein's "Persuading annoying turtles: Blocking conspiracies from taking our rationality"

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I share Sheldon Wein's taste for the philosophically puzzling. His, and mine too, run from the well-travelled paradoxes of inference and preface-making to the media's more recent enthusiasm for unmerited attributions of conspiracy. Each of the three is a large enough matter for the long essay or short book but, owing to the strictures of present-day conferencing, Professor Wein has framed them here in *aperçus* whose respective interconnections I have found too gossamer-like for my confident apprehension. To some extent, then, I'll have to make my own way with linkages. Apologies.

Lewis Carroll (to use C. L. Dodgson's famous pen-name) was a substantial symbolic logician in 19th century England, with whom the traditionalist Wykeham Professor of Logic declined to speak or correspond about the state that logic was then in.¹ Carroll was also a venturesome and serious paradoxer. The substance of the fictionalized chat between Achilles and the tortoise is well-known and, for what I want to say about it here, needn't detain us for long.² But it would repay our reflections to pause awhile with the three different ways in which the relation of deductive consequence manifests itself. One is consequence-having or entailment. It is a binary relation over truth-evaluable items. The second is consequence-spotting or the recognition of what follows from what, as in conditional proof. It is a ternary relation over the relata of finitely structured havings and cognitive agents. Third is consequence-drawing, or inference or belief-update. It, too, is a ternary relation over relata of finite spottings and cognitive agents. Consequence-havings obtain, or not, independently of third party involvement. But when a spotting occurs, the spotter forms the true belief that the spotted item follows of necessity from the propositions that imply it. When a drawing occurs, the drawer forms the true compound belief that the spotted consequence is true and *made so* by the truth of the propositions that imply it. (Thus absorbing Boghossian's Taking Condition, I think.) Although I've drawn them here for propositional relations, the distinctions at hand are easily adapted for argumental application. The point of mentioning them here is that had they been in the possession of either party to it, the Achilles-tortoise discussion would have been short and blessedly free of all whiff of paradox. The reason why is straightforward. Inference, in part, is always a matter for epistemology and the other sciences of cognition, and never a matter for logic alone.

Consider the case of Charlie. Charlie is faced with an argument. He accepts that the argument is valid, and he accepts that its premisses are true. He hasn't yet declared himself on

¹ John Cook Wilson, author of the posthumous *Statement and Inference*, in two volumes, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926.

² My own first philosophical go at it was in 1965. More recent is "Required by logic", *The Carrollian: The Lewis Carroll Journal*, a special double issue on "What the Tortoise Said to Achilles: Lewis Carroll's Paradox of Inference", guest-edited by Amirouche Moktefi and Francine Abeles, 28 (2016), 112-124.

the argument's conclusion. At this point two critical and inequivalent questions arise. One is whether Charlie is compelled by the force of logic to accept the conclusion. The other is whether Charlie can be compelled (lawfully) by the force of anything else to accept the conclusion. The answer in each case is in the negative. For consider, having spotted that S' is a consequence of propositions he accepts as true, Charlie has occasion to consider S' . Now that he is thinking of it, possibly for the first time, he may find cause *not* to accept it as true. If so, then he can consistently reject it if he changes his valuation of at least one of the premisses or withdraws his acceptance of the implication.³ After all, isn't this what Frege did when Russell's letter arrived? Alternatively, he could go neutral with respect to the premisses or, equally, with respect to the putative implication (or both). What we learn from this is that acceptance is not closed under accepted consequence. Again, the reason why is that neither spotting nor drawing is solely a matter of logic. Each in its way is a matter for both logic and epistemology combined. Wein postulates the presence of a gap. Indeed there is a difference gap between implication and inference. But the gap here is a difference in time, the time it takes to consider and then respond to S' . The gap might be slight. It might be a matter of nanoseconds. But it alone is enough to dissolve the paradox. More deeply, however, there is no property of the consequence relation that uniquely and exhaustively calls the shots for inference.⁴ I conclude from this that there is nothing of moment for philosophical theories of conspiracy to learn from this case. The same is true, as I see it, of the preface paradox too.

Like the Achilles and tortoise paradox, the preface paradox is the product of misconception.⁵ In each case, there were relevant considerations in plain sight which, had they been noted, would have stilled the pulse of paradoxical attestation. In its crudest form, the preface puzzle presupposes sentences in the form " $B_a(S_1, S_2, \dots, S_n) \Rightarrow B_a(S_1), B_a(S_2), \dots, B_a(S_n)$ ", where ' B_a ' abbreviates 'Arjen believes that'; the S_i are all the statements in Arjen's book; ' \Rightarrow ' 'denotes' a strong implication relation; and the sentence itself is tenseless. Then, if Arjen's book is of even modest size, the antecedent and consequent of the conditional are both false on empirical grounds in real time. Beings like us are pretty bad at grasping, never mind believing, long conjunctions, and we're no better at remembering all those conjuncts. In a more realistic formatting, we are given something in the form " $\forall S (S \in D \Rightarrow B_a S) \wedge B_a \exists S \in D (\sim S)$ ", where D is the document in question. Clearly there is no paradox here. I can believe (*de dicto*) that something I believe (*de re*) is false, without believing *of* anything that is true and false. Like many of its like, the preface paradox had to be pedalled before it found takers. In any case, when we turn our attention to the present-day relish for conspiracy-attribution, we find nothing in the wording of prefaces to guide our reflections there.

There was a time, and still is, when conspiracies were everyday matters of business as usual. In the criminal division of every office of federal prosecutions, hypotheses are raised and entertained, and decisions taken about whether Mr. So-and-So or Ms. Such-and-Such is

³ The solution is Harman's, though not offered as such. See Gilbert Harman, "Induction: a discussion of the relevance of the theory of knowledge to the theory of induction", in Marshall Swain, editor, *Induction, Acceptance, and Rational Belief*, pages 83-99, Dordrecht: Reidel, 1970.

⁴ I don't think that it should be ruled out that the forces that regulate belief, acceptance, inference and the like are causal in nature. In that case, they might be thought to be matters of a *naturalized* logic in the manner of Woods, *Errors of Reasoning: Naturalizing the Logic of Inference*, London: College Publications, 2013; reprinted with corrections in 2014. Naturalized logic links quite interactively to epistemology in the spotting and drawing sectors of consequence.

⁵ The paradox is the invention of David Makinson in D. C. Makinson, "The paradox of the preface", *Analysis*, 25 (1965), 205-207.

prosecutable on a charge of criminal conspiracy, which in Canada would, if proved, be a violation of section 465 of the Criminal Code. A good prosecutor will have a nose for prosecutable conspiracies; and to have it, he must be a dab hand at conspiracy theory.

In the recent (and highly alarming) sociopolitical rhetoric of recent times, attributions of conspiracy are usually, even when adequately supported, attributions of things that aren't actually conspiracies. As I write (on the fourth last day of April, 2020), the dominant conspiracy theory has it that the government of a large and important country suppressed critical life-saving information about a theretofore unknown strain of coronavirus, shut down the city of its origin, banned all domestic travel to and from the city, having made it possible earlier and afterward for some million of its inhabitants to disperse to worldwide destinations elsewhere. For all I know, these attributions could be false. It might all be a malicious fabrication. But, true or false, and innocently or wickedly intended if true, the attribution is one of conspiracy in only the subsidiary technical sense that when someone is charged with the commission of a crime, prosecutors must prove that he conspired to commit it; that is, that he thought about it and proceeded with it with *mens rea*.⁶ As we have it now, those attributions are accusations of the *commission* of wrongdoing, not just of the plans to bring it about. The network of inferences on which the attribution rests amounts to a theory that accounts for the known data. It is a good or bad theory independently of partisan interests in it. Apart from all the ruckus contrived by the media the present theory has prompted two different calls to action. In the one instance, the theory is a complexly structured hypothesis, and the call to action is a call to investigate the matter further, with a view to eventual confirmation or disconfirmation. This, we may say, is the Peircian option. The other call to action is markedly different. It takes the accusation as proved and calls for compensatory and possibly punitive countermeasures. This, we may say, is the give-no-quarter option. If philosophers know anything, they know that the line between a hypothetical theory and a confirmed theory is not self-announcing.⁷ That being so, any advice that might be offered will have to be heavily freighted with cost-benefit considerations well beyond the reach of most of us who jointly make up the informal logic industry. Professor Wein gives no particulars of the case he discusses, although clearly it isn't this one. It is an imaginary case in which a very clever person is making a compelling-seeming case for something transparently not true, and bloody awful if true. The problem seems to be that the more we bear down on the conspiracy peddler with counterconsiderations, the cleverer he is in repelling them. If this starts to sound like the Heraclitean presence that subdues Aristotle's defence of the Principle of Noncontradiction in Book Gamma of the *Metaphysics*, or the failure of Plato to take Parmenides to the mat whose very existence he is committed to denying, it raises a terrifically good question for everyone to ponder. One is why it is thought to be necessary to kill an argument for an utterly preposterous conclusion as a condition of denying it a place in the arrangements of one's life? For have we not seen that, however skillfully such arguments are contrived, we ourselves are never in sole thrall to the requirements of logic.⁸

⁶ English usage is neutral on whether conspiracy requires plural conspirators or allows for just one. In law, conspiracy is always a plural matter. On the solo side, we have 'plot', 'scheme', 'plan', and 'manoeuvre' as synonyms of 'conspire'. This would validate the usage of Amos 7.10: "Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel; the land is unable to endure all his words." On the plural side, we have 'conspire', 'collude' and 'collaborate', thus validating the usage of Psalm 85.5: "For they have conspired together with one mind/Against You they make a covenant."

⁷ The media, in contrast, have a lesser interest in the difference.

⁸ The sorry role of conspiracy theories, real or imagined, in present-day sociopolitical discourse in what passes for journals of record in press and digital configuration calls to mind some words given in evidence to the Senate

Committee on Mass Media over a half-century ago: “My experience with journalism authorizes me to record that a very large number of them are ignorant, lazy, opinionated, intellectually dishonest and inadequately supervised. The profession is heavily cluttered with abrasive youngsters who substitute ‘commitment’ for insight, and to a lesser extent, with aged hacks toiling through a miasma of mounting decrepitude.” Every Canadian informal logician should know the author of these words. The first non-Canadian of our profession to identify the speaker will be awarded Frege’s Virtual Cigar. And before signing off, does any present-day reader think that the state of the Fourth Estate is better or more honourable in 2020 than it was in 1969?