

## THOUGHTS AND BELIEFS

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In some contexts, "to think" is substitutable, *salve* almost everything, for "to believe." In what follows I am not concerned to argue against this lexical platitude, but to exhibit contexts in which the roles of these verbs, and related words, diverge. My interest in exhibiting this divergence (and indeed in heightening its salience by sharpening our focus on it) is based on my experience of its usefulness applied to the sorting out of our intellectual life. By "intellectual life" I mean something that all intelligent beings can be said, in various, family-resemblant ways, to have, but about which a proper subset of these beings has additionally a more-or-less worked out view. I try to show that a better view, for those who have a view at all, can be achieved via the schematization of thoughts and beliefs I am proposing. (The proposed schematization, I want to emphasize, is not supposed to be identical with anything like the one correct analysis.)

It does not *seem* to be the case in writing remarks suggested by the topic "Thoughts and Beliefs," for example, that I am engaged in saying *what I believe*. I seem, instead, to be engaged in saying *what I think*. I speak of how it *seems* because at least one of the reasons for making a sharp distinction between "what I believe" and "what I think" is, roughly speaking, phenomenological: what I am giving in writing this sentence and its companions does not *feel* deep-seated but made up as I go along. I suggest this experienced contrast is allied to the categorial distinction, "beliefs"/"thoughts." Putting this point more carefully, the experienced contrast (which, of course, some people may not feel) does not require the categorial distinction but the distinction, once made, does explain why we might feel the contrast. A wrinkle in experience does not require us to postulate a wrinkle in reality (since

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*Diálogos*, 50 (1987) pp. 135-143.

experience sometimes just gets wrinkled), but if we have an independent, overall-best-theory based reason for believing reality *is* wrinkled, that wrinkle will, on the same best theory, explain the subjective one.

Closely related to the initial phenomenological contrast, and possibly also in part a matter of how certain experiences strike those having them, is this: saying "what one thinks" is not constrained by the requirement of sincerity (henceforth RS). I violate RS by letting on that I believe, or pretending to believe, what I do not. If saying what I think is not, and does not pretend to be, a case of saying what I believe, sincerity (defined in terms of belief) is obviously irrelevant.

But why isn't saying what I think a case of saying what I believe? Part of the answer is that, quite apart from experiences people have of sometimes feeling and sometimes not feeling constrained by RS, it can be argued that RS is inappropriate in certain cases. That inappropriateness is then a reason for segregating those cases from cases of saying what is believed.

The argument for the inappropriateness of RS can begin by considering what I am doing now. This is just one instance, as it happens written rather than *viva voce*, of a familiar genre: saying what one thinks on topic *T*, or about distinction *D*, book *X*, the work of *Y*, theory *Z*, and so forth. The fundamental requirement in situations of this kind is getting it right ("getting the damn thing right," in Clifford Geertz's words) or coming up with the, or some of the, relevant truths. Although the situations I am thinking of are fairly complicated and identification of relevant truths correspondingly difficult, they are not essentially or "in principle" different from very simple, and again quite familiar, occasions on which one is expected to say what is true. "What's it doing out?" solicits a report about the weather and the relevant truth, in this paradigmatically simple case, will be given by a sentence like "It is raining." Remarkable, in this unremarkable situation, is that it is one we are all likely to exit deserving Collingwood's description of Whitehead: "...he does not care what he says, so long as it is true."<sup>1</sup> Collingwood's description sticks to most people in the weather situation (though only to the "better" or more "enlightened" discussants in the more complex situations indicated schematically above) because most people are guided entirely by the weather in answering questions about it, are subject-matter dominated and self-

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<sup>1</sup> R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945), p. 165.

forgetful. This is not, in the weather situation, a matter of moral or intellectual virtue: people can, obviously, lie or be mistaken about the weather as they can lie or be mistaken about anything else.

What the weather situation does show is this: discovering that it is raining is identical with discovering that I believe that it is raining. From *my* point of view (though not from *yours*), there are not two facts: the fact that it is raining and the fact that I believe that it is. There is only one fact whose direct expression is the sentence "It is raining" and whose qualified, or possibly diffident or self-conscious expression is the sentence "I believe that it is raining." When I say "It is raining," "I have not [as Stuart Hampshire puts it] decided *to* believe; I have decided *that* the statement in question is true."<sup>2</sup> Prior writes in "On Spurious Egocentrism": "It is not possible to believe anything seriously without believing that the believed thing is the case, or is true...,"<sup>3</sup> and (like any identity) the identity he underlines holds the other way round also: if "believing" means "believing to be true," "believing to be true" means "believing." It is not possible to believe that anything is true, *e.g.*, that it is raining, without believing it. It does not mean that, in the weather situation, either we are bound to have or should encourage ourselves to have the thought or a thought like: I believe that it is true that it is raining so I must believe that it is raining. Rehearsing this triviality would, in the weather situation as elsewhere, have zero utility. Instead, Prior's identity (especially in the flipped version) is supposed to show that, in indefinitely many situations including the weather situation, there is only a truth about something or other, *e.g.*, the weather, and no *additional* truth about belief. From the egocentric point of view, there are no truths about me: "The self of solipsism [to quote Wittgenstein's extreme version of the same point] shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it."<sup>4</sup> In less extreme terms, we might say "It is raining" and "I believe that it is raining" are *operationally equivalent*.

It is, of course, both possible for something to *be* true without my believing it and possible for me to *believe* something without its being true. To admit this is just to disclaim omniscience and inerrancy. That

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<sup>2</sup> Stuart Hampshire, *Thought and Action* (New York: Viking Press, 1960), p. 158.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur N. Prior, *Papers on Time and Tense* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears & B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 5.364; p. 117.

is why what I believe is one thing and what is true is another thing or why [in other words] “true” and “believed by me” are not synonyms. But as I actually think about anything—like the weather—I cannot keep “true” and “believed by me” separate. This is because there is *only one* research procedure (“looking out the window” or something of the sort) shared by “It is raining” and “I believe that it is raining.”

Again, this not because from my vantage point facts about the weather become, or at bottom are, facts about my beliefs (*acosmic* egocentrism), but because from my vantage point facts about my beliefs become, or at bottom are, facts about the weather (*adoxastic* egocentrism).<sup>5</sup> I do not look out the window to find out what I believe. From my (grammatically and existentially first person singular, present tense) point of view, I don’t explain my saying “It is raining” on the basis of my beliefs: I say it is raining because it *is* raining, not because I believe that it is. In relying on the weather to explain my weather reports, I am not using the following omniscience-claiming schema; “For any *p*, if *p*, then I believe that *p*/*p*/therefore, I believe that *p*.” I am not explaining beliefs so I don’t need (and *a fortiori* don’t need crazy) belief-explaining schemata.

Beliefs come into the picture only from an external, or third person, point of view. From that point of view, it may be urged that I must have had a belief about the weather at the time I uttered my report. Something may really be explained (or at least exhibited as fitting into the normal course of human experience) by attributing to me a belief that it is raining. If so, I have no reason to resist the attribution. Indeed, if I turn out to have been mistaken about the weather, I shall very likely, in Monday morning quarterbacking myself, attribute to myself the belief, as it has turned out false, that it was raining. And of course I play the same game with other people that you play with me. I distinguish facts about the weather from facts about a person’s weather beliefs; and I acknowledge and depend upon, like everybody else, one set of research procedures for getting hold of weather facts and a very different set for getting hold of belief facts.

The first person singular, present tense perspective is special, or operationally—comparatively—simple, because within it my own

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<sup>5</sup> Suggested by Scheler’s terms, in his discussion of Spinoza: “acosmic”/“atheistic” pantheism. See Max Scheler, *Philosophical Perspectives*, trans. Oscar A. Hacc (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 53.

beliefs disappear. All I have to worry about is what I think where the sense of “think” is the sense it has in questions of the form “What do you think about distinction *D*, book *X*, the work of *Y*, theory *Z*?” or of the form “What are your thoughts on topic *T*?” Although the first person singular, present tense perspective is being emphasized here, and throughout, we are not (it should also be emphasized) advancing what Prior calls “an egocentric theory of truth.” An egocentric theory has to regard “true” and “believed by me” as synonyms, but they simply aren’t, or my having false beliefs would be logically impossible. Prior says, accurately, that “I think true only those opinions with which I agree, not because this agreement is what ‘truth’ means, but on the contrary because ‘agreeing with *X*’ means thinking true what *X* thinks true.”<sup>6</sup> We can now say in parallel to Prior: I think true only what I believe, not because this belief is what “truth” means, but on the contrary because “being believed by me” means thinking true what I believe. I don’t [in other word] think something is true because I believe it; I believe it because I think that it is true.

Despite this agreement with Prior, I think there is an egocentrism which is not spurious: the egocentrism that allows *me* (at least) to dispense with questions about *my* beliefs. It is just this feature of my cognitive situation that absolves me from worries about sincerity. We said above that RS is inappropriate in the weather situation and we can now say why. That situation is not one in which a grammatically first person singular, present tense sentence need be uttered. What matters is that a sentence like “It is raining” is in fact my present utterance. Since, in normal circumstances, I regard my own present utterance as the result of applying appropriate research procedures about the weather, and not as an expression of a weather belief, there is no room for *my* applying appropriate research procedures about the weather to see whether what I am saying is correct. I can’t do two things at once if they are the same thing. I can, as mentioned above, lie about the weather. A lie, however, violates a commandment like “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor” construed as containing “Don’t lie,” rather than RS. I violate RS by letting on that I believe, or pretending to believe, what I do not. In lying about the weather by uttering “It is raining,” I am letting on, or pretending that it is raining, when it is not. My lying is successful if the person lied to

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<sup>6</sup> Prior, *Op. cit.*, p. 15.

comes to have a false belief about the weather. It is not the purpose of my lying, and not necessary, that the person lied to comes to have a belief about my beliefs, though if he does, he will have to believe (falsely) that I believe that it is raining or he won't come himself to believe that it is raining, and my lying will fail. It may be urged, against this way of looking at the matter, that no one comes to believe anything *sur parole* without a belief about the speaker's beliefs being formed. It would, I think, be difficult to distinguish (as a matter either of experience or overall best theory) this rational reconstruction of the communication situation from others involving attributions of other beliefs: for example, a situationally undefeated belief in human veracity, a belief which is not, save by attenuation, "about" the speaker.<sup>7</sup>

However these issues are resolved, it suffices here to underline the distinctive purpose of insincerity: to produce a belief about my beliefs and thereby about me through the pretensive presentation of a belief, a presentation which is both a mode and an aspect of the pretensive presentation of the self. Lying, in contrast both to sincere and to pretensive self-presentation, is not a mode of self-presentation. On reflection I do not think it is paradoxical that self's presentation of self is often contrary to self's interest and that self's interest is often served, as in the case of lying, by the self-effacing, subject-matter-dominated transparency of the genuine truth-teller. I remark in passing that the distinctiveness of sincerity, its difference from simple honesty, makes plausible the view put forward by Lionel Trilling that sincerity has an "Origin and Rise" and supports, from the conceptual side, his claim that "The sincerity of Achilles or Beowulf cannot be discussed: they neither have nor lack sincerity."<sup>8</sup>

It is possible to view the complicated situations—saying what one thinks on topic *T*, or about distinction *D*, book *X*, the work of *Y*, theory *Z*—in the same way one views the weather situation. The difference is that people almost always think of the weather situation as I have described it, but often shy away from thinking of more complicated cognitive situations along the same lines. Because it is possible to view the more complicated situations as situations in which

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<sup>7</sup> Were it crucial to the argument to select, and defend, a rational reconstruction of the communication situation, one would have to examine views such as those of H.P. Grice.

<sup>8</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press Paperback, 1972), p. 2.

it is precisely one's beliefs that one is supposed, as clearly and accurately as one can, to present. From the third person point of view, this may be a distinction without a difference: E. saying what he thinks is going to be understood as E. saying what he—presently—believes. But the advantage of being me, which I can squander by trying to take a third person view of myself, is that I don't have to worry about my beliefs at all. I can, in short, assume an attitude like Whitehead's (as Collingwood describes it) of not caring what I say so long as it is true.

The assumption of the Whiteheadian attitude involves assigning full responsibility for the determination of thoughts to my present capacity to think and judge and assigning zero weight to doctrinal, credal, positional allegiances, commitments, adhesions. This last dense phrase is supposed to evoke, onomatopoeically, the encumbrance, the impedimentation, of past belief. Let us assume that the appeal of the Whiteheadian attitude—that is, of disencumbrance—has by now been felt. It may still be thought that certain difficulties stand in the way of its achievement. I try to deal with three of these in the next (and last) three paragraphs: (i) Does the Whiteheadian attitude involve belieflessness? (ii) Does it involve irrational confidence in present intellectual competence? (iii) Does it involve an unjustifiable disregard of consistency?

**The belieflessness question.** There is no question of whether anyone can attain a state of belieflessness. *X* is beliefless [so we may analyze] iff an ideal observer, theorizing about the total range of *X*'s behavior, would find no explanatory purpose served by the attribution, to *X*, of any belief. It is hard to imagine a situation, on the near side of death, which could satisfy this definition of belieflessness and certainly the weather situation is not one such. In that situation an observer would credit me with a belief about the weather (an attribution which might turn out to be explanatorily vacuous) and (more usefully) a package of beliefs about the linguistic item "It is raining" and its expressive power relative to an audience, actual or assumed. However my utterance of the sentence "It is raining" is neither the result of, nor an instance of, my theorizing about myself; it is not an oblique way of ascribing to myself the belief that it is raining. The weather situation has indeed been cast in the role of paradigm throughout because that situation displays the absence of, the absence of a place for, a layer of theorizing about the self between circumambient weather and utterance of "It is raining." Once again this is

perfectly compatible with someone else, in the course of *their* theorizing, finding it explanatorily useful to ascribe to me the belief, amongst others, that it is raining.

**The confidence question.** Does the assumption of the Whiteheadian attitude involve irrational, or somehow excessive, confidence in present intellectual competence? It is not, here, a question of empirical confidence which may be thought to wax and wane in the life of any self-monitoring enquirer. It is certainly possible that the views I formulated *yesterday* are better (more revelatory of relevant truths) than those I am formulating *now*, that I am formulating in writing this sentence. I may even have an unhappy sense that this is so. There are nevertheless limits, not psychological limits on how much discouragement I can endure while sustaining the project of articulating my thoughts, but structural limits on how much self-disparagement (or even self-doubt) I can exercise before the project of articulating my thoughts loses formal coherence or suffers pragmatic self-refutation. I can think without incoherence or self-refutation "What I thought yesterday was incorrect, but what I am thinking now is correct," but I cannot think without incoherence or self-refutation "What I thought yesterday was correct, but what I am thinking now is incorrect." Upon this asymmetry reposes a purely formal confidence in present intellectual competence. This point can also be made as follows. Suppose I have a fund of already achieved results, thoughts I can remember or have written down *Zettel*-style, that I wish to draw upon in executing this project. Quite independently of any judgment I may be in a position to make about my competence when the fund was established as compared to my present competence, I can accord items from the fund (*i.e.*, old thoughts) at most the status of *probable* truths. To regard old thoughts as true now because I thought them true in the past (as opposed to my thinking them true now *simpliciter* or still thinking them true) would be to put those thoughts outside the range of present judgement. I am not sure there are any circumstances in which it would be reasonable, in which it would make good sense, to shelter thoughts from present judgement, but I am certain that thoughts so sheltered cannot be offered as what I think *now*. In making this point, I concede, I am only, from another angle, stumbling upon the extensional identity of *what I think now* with what I think is true and the lack of even extensional identity of *what I thought then* with what I think is true.

**The consistency question.** Does the assumption of the Whiteheadian attitude involve a cavalier disregard of consistency? How we answer this question depends on the model of consistency. Brian Ellis defines a belief system in *Rational Belief Systems* as “a set of beliefs.”<sup>9</sup> Suppose I think of myself as adding to my set of beliefs in writing this paper. I may then, quite reasonably, suppose I have to worry about the overall consistency of the set of beliefs. On this view I should have to worry about “hidden contradictions” in the system, worry about hard-to-notice, or subtle, inconsistencies. Now there is a great deal to be said about this model and the worries it generates.<sup>10</sup> I suggest, however, that the model and the worries associated with it can be discarded by someone concerned with thoughts, with “what I think now” as opposed to beliefs. In articulating my thoughts, in saying what I think now, in writing this paper for example, I need concern myself only with what might be called “speech-act consistency.” I shouldn’t say “ $p$  and not- $p$ ,” even if the conjuncts are at opposite ends of a speech or paper, because this fails as a speech-act. Since this whole paper counts as a single extended speech act (happening in a big chunk of the specious present), it cannot contain a “ $p$ ” and a “not- $p$ ” without generating some degree of self-infirmation. To have a thought, as I have been understanding it throughout this paper, is to have something articulable. Speech-act consistency can thus be seen as a constraint on the process of articulation; and speech-act inconsistency seen as a species (though not the only one) of inarticulateness or even thoughtlessness.

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<sup>9</sup> Brian Ellis, *Rational Belief Systems* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> For an interesting, though I would claim wrong-headed, discussion of “hidden contradictions,” see Charles S. Chihara, “Wittgenstein’s Analysis of the Paradoxes in His Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics”, *The Philosophical Review* (July, 1977), pp. 365-381.