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ON WILLFULLY CONTRARIOUS BELIEFS

What is common to the conception of an ideal legislator, the idealizational conception of science, the adaptational interpretation of historical materialism, non-Marxian historical materialism, unitarian metaphysics and the interpretation of Gombrowicz in terms of the non-Christian model of human? Aside from their Author, it is the methodical application of idealization. But even that does not capture the gist of Leszek Nowak's mind. This is easily seen when one considers not only the above conceptions but also the numerous, quite brilliant publications directed toward the general public. Then the only common denominator turns out to be the tendency to swim against the current, the tendency to move in exactly the opposite direction than the others, in other words — contrariness. If there is anything that constitutes the essence of Leszek Nowak's thought, it is *being against* — against the received view, against what captivates our minds, against what appears to us to be true, against beliefs toward which we drift.

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1. The Paradox of Contrarious Beliefs

1.1. Usually the concept of contrariness is related to our actions or to persons. In a paradigmatic case, α 's ϕ ing is contrarious when α ϕ s (α 's ϕ ing is an action of α), α believes that someone expects that α not ϕ , α wants to act contrary to that person's expectations and this belief and desire actually explain α 's ϕ ing.

It is usually assumed that unlike actions, beliefs are involuntary. Thence derives one of Pascal's dilemmas. One may want to believe in God and, having weighed all the reasons for and against the belief, decide that one will believe in God and yet nevertheless remain unmoved in one's belief that, in fact, God does *not* exist. We may wish all we want to believe that the Sun is made from chewing gum, but we will not "install" this belief into us simply by *wanting* or *deciding* to believe it. We are passive toward our beliefs, as Hume puts it.

1.2. This suggests that the very concept of a contrarious belief is inconsistent. If something is contrarious, it is voluntary. Beliefs are involuntary, so they cannot be contrarious.

It should be noted that this paradox concerns beliefs, not mere thoughts. We can represent to ourselves in thoughts what we do not believe to be the case. We can bring to mind various things pretty much voluntarily — even contrariously. What accounts for the difference that contrarious beliefs, but not contrarious thoughts, seem to be paradoxical is the fact that beliefs are tied to the notion of truth in a way in which thoughts are not. (We will consider this link to truth in §3.)

1.3. None of this, of course, throws any doubt on the possibility of as-if contrarious beliefs. It may very well be that someone holds a belief, which happens to go against the grain of accepted and expected opinion but whose origin has nothing to do with contrariness or any other exertion of the will.

I will not try to decide which of Leszek Nowak's beliefs are as-if contrarious and which are in fact contrarious. The witnesses to the

origin of at least some of Nowak's theories will have to agree that at least some of his beliefs fully deserve to be called "contrarious."

I will thus start with the assumption that there are contrarious beliefs (and so that they are possible too). I will try to find the sources of the above paradox in our way of thinking about beliefs rather than in the beliefs themselves. I will proceed in two stages. In §2, I will describe two ways of thinking about beliefs. The paradox of contrarious beliefs finds its natural grounding in the first view. This might already be enough to shed doubt on the inescapability of the paradox. However, Williams (1970/1973) has proposed quite a general objection that beliefs cannot be voluntary because of their connection with truth. In §3, I will attempt to answer that objection.

2. Two Ways of Thinking about Beliefs

2.1. The guiding metaphor of the atomistic-naturalistic view of beliefs is that of being hit. We acquire a belief as a result of being "hit" by certain fragments of the world. When we look at a red apple, the light-waves reflected from the apple hit our retina and are processed by our perceptual apparatus. The end result of such a process is the belief that there is an apple in front us. (Locke's or Hume's empiricist theories of beliefs are good illustrations of this type of thinking.) Indeed perceptual beliefs are the paradigms of beliefs on this approach.

On this interpretation of the notion of a belief, it is hard to imagine how voluntary beliefs in general, and contrarious beliefs in particular, could be possible. The subject is entirely passive with respect to her belief.

2.2. The guiding metaphor of the holistic-normative view of beliefs is that of a web. The contents of beliefs are related inferentially to one another.¹ A belief is defined by its place in a web of rational

¹ It should be noted that inferential relations are not limited to formal or logical relations; see Sellars's (1956) distinction between material and formal inferential relations.

(normative) relations to other beliefs. The central claim of holistic-normative theories of beliefs (e.g. Sellars 1963; Brandom 1994) is that to have a belief with the content p the subject must be able to master a sufficiently great number of the inferential relations that the content p enters into.

Theoretical, not perceptual, beliefs are paradigmatic types of beliefs on this approach. This is not to say, however, that perceptual beliefs constitute something of an anomaly for such views. The representatives of the holistic-normative theories emphasize that the mere activation of some neurons in our brains is not sufficient for us to have a belief. To have the belief that there is a red apple in front of me, it is not enough that a group of neurons be activated even if those neurons are somehow correlated with the color red, apple-like shape or some other features of the red apple. To have the belief that there is a red apple in front of me requires that I am able to navigate the inferential net into which the belief enters. I must be able to draw the right inferences — that there is a colored apple in front of me, that there is a red fruit in front of me, and so on. This (sufficiently good) ability to replicate the inferential relations between the contents is a necessary condition for me to have the perceptual belief that there is a red apple in front of me. It is this ability that distinguishes a parrot from a person. A parrot can be taught to repeat “Red apple!”, quite possibly it can be taught to repeat it in response to the presence of a red apple and only in those circumstances. This is not enough, however, for the parrot to have the *belief* that there is a red apple in front of it for the parrot is not able to move along the net of inferential relations into which the content “there is a red apple in front of me” enters.

2.3. The holistic-normative approach is much more congenial to the idea of a voluntary belief. The having of a belief, on this view, is not entirely passive. To the contrary, in order to have a belief we must demonstrate a certain ability to follow the inferential relations into which the content of the belief enters. Even though the subject is only required to have the *ability* to follow sufficiently many of the inferential relations, not to actually follow them, this still involves a

different picture of the subject of beliefs as not passive but quite active (at least potentially).

Even with this change in thinking about the subject of beliefs, one may be quite skeptical about voluntary beliefs. How can one want to believe something and, as a result of this want, actually come to believe it? One has to admit that the possibility of voluntary perceptual beliefs really does seem to be quite far-fetched unless, of course, the desire to believe that there is a chocolate ice-cream in front of me were to lead me to buy the ice-cream, to put it in front of me and, finally, to look at it triumphantly. But there are numerous other beliefs, which could be described as organizing or hypothetical, with respect to which the thought that they are subject to our will is not so foreign.

Consider a detective story example. A detective investigates a crime. The evidence gathered points to one or two people from among numerous suspects. The detective tries to organize his knowledge about the crime committed. His task is to look for other evidence, to interrogate various people and, finally, to organize the knowledge that he has gathered so as to solve the puzzle. If one were to trust many detective stories, one good heuristic that detectives often use is to accept, as a working assumption, that the crime was committed by the person who is suspected the least. Presumably the justification for such a heuristic lies in the fact that a person who commits a premeditated crime must count with the possibility that she will be suspected and so she must plan the crime in such a way as to redirect suspicions at other people. When the detective accepts such a hypothesis as a working assumption, he tries to see how it organizes what he knows about the crime, how it explains puzzling facts, what sorts of questions it generates for further exploration, and so on. The detective thus accepts the hypothesis for the time being and tries to locate it among other beliefs he has. If the hypothesis turns out to be fruitful (if it tallies with other beliefs, if it leads to the discovery of new facts, and so on), the detective will find it more probable, until he accepts it as true.

If such a hypothesis is accepted as true by the detective, the detective will have formed a belief that was at its origin a voluntarily accepted hypothesis. Of course, the hypothesis had to be confronted with other beliefs, it had to tally with them, and so it had to be

appropriately related to reality, in order for the detective to have accepted it as true, in order for him to have come to actually believe it. Nonetheless this is an example of a voluntary thought, created at a whim, which was transformed into a full-blooded belief. If so then it is possible to have beliefs voluntarily though only on the additional condition that the beliefs can enter into a system of our other beliefs. One may suggest that the ability to form voluntary beliefs is characteristic of really flexible and creative minds.

It might turn out that the inclusion of such a new hypothetical thought into a received belief system will require that some of the received beliefs be revised. In such a case, when someone revises his old beliefs *in order to* uphold the new hypothetical thought, it is hard to resist thinking that such a person really does *want to* believe that hypothetical thought.

3. Are Contrarious Beliefs Directed at Truth?

The holistic-normative approach shows that the subject is not entirely passive with respect to the beliefs she holds. However, there is an objection in the literature which is designed to show that no belief can be voluntary.

3.1. Bernard Williams (1970/1973, p. 136) points out that, unlike acts of will, beliefs aim at truth. To believe that *p* one must believe that *p* is true. Someone who takes one's belief to be false must also reject it. This close relationship between beliefs and truth is demonstrated by Moore's paradox, for example: it is paradoxical to say "I believe that *p* but not *p*." At the same time, desires do not aim at truth. There is nothing strange in saying "I desire *p* but not *p*" — quite to the contrary, the fact that the world is not the way that I desire it to be seems to give me additional reason to change the world so that it fits my desires.

Williams argues as follows:

If I could acquire a belief at will, I could acquire it whether it was true or not; moreover I would know that I could acquire it whether it was true or not. If in full consciousness I could will to acquire a "belief" irrespective of its truth, it is unclear that before the event I could

seriously think of it as a belief, i.e. as something purporting to represent reality. (1970/1973, p. 148)

The paradox of a voluntary belief, in Williams' view, relies on the assumption that the subject is aware of the fact that willing to have a belief is tantamount to abandoning one crucial feature of beliefs, viz. their aiming at truth. The paradox consists in the fact that, on one hand, we desire to acquire a belief, i.e. we desire to be in a state that aims at truth but, on the other hand, we know that the method of acquiring beliefs in response to desires is not good for it does not guarantee (it does not even make it more probable) that the beliefs acquired in this way will aim at truth.

Putting the matter in this way is, first, subject to the objection that the paradox arises only on the assumption that a person has such meta-theoretical knowledge. This immediately gives rise to the possibility that there is nothing paradoxical about a voluntary belief as long as the person is unaware of the lack of connection between a willful belief and truth.² We could, of course, acknowledge that a belief acquired in this way would have an arational origin but as long as it functioned in the belief system in the usual way (in particular, if the subject would be inclined to reject it in case it were to come into conflict with the subject's other beliefs about reality) there would be no reason to disqualify it as a belief.

3.2. Williams's argument invites another kind of response, however. For it opens the possibility that one might have certain meta-theoretical views concerning the best methods of aiming at truth that *would* find a connection between will and truth. Williams works on the assumption that a willful belief is completely arbitrary as far as truth is concerned. L. Nowak has in particular advanced certain meta-theoretical views, according to which there is a connection between contrariness and truth. If he were right then, even on Williams' terms, there would nothing paradoxical about a certain kind of voluntary beliefs, viz. the contrarious ones.

² Such an objection is presented by, for example, Scott-Kakures (1993).

L. Nowak seems to hold the view that there is a connection between contrariness and truth or, more precisely, between commonsense (which is uncontrarious) and falsehood. He claims that contrarious beliefs have a better chance of being true than uncontrarious ones since uncontrarious beliefs conform to the established commonsense. He thus proposes to comply with the rule of nonstandard discoveries, i.e. with the assumption that “things are quite other than the majority assumes them to be” (2000, p. 162).

In his (2000) book on Gombrowicz, Nowak has in mind a particular class of beliefs, viz. social and religious beliefs. In such cases indeed one might conjecture that there is a tendency for those beliefs to get entrenched that serve the ideological interests of certain groups of people. To use Marx’s classical example: one would expect individualist ideologies in a capitalist system of production because they tend to conceal class-based reality. One would expect pro-feminine cultural beliefs in a patriarchic society. And so on.

However, the alleged connections between contrarious (and uncontrarious) thoughts and truth (and falsehood) are too elusive to be treated as holding for *all* contrarious (and uncontrarious) thoughts. One should wonder especially whether scientific beliefs could equally be argued to serve ideological interests.³ There are, of course, social interests associated with the advantages of adhering to an accepted paradigm. It is unclear, however, why the accepted theory together with uncontrarious beliefs circling on its orbits should have any lesser claim to truth than alternative contrarious theories. Both seem to be equally prone to being false.

3.3. Nowak’s arguments that contrarious beliefs have a better chance of being true than uncontrarious ones are thus not fully convincing. This is not to say, however, that there is nothing to his thought. I have

³ One cannot, of course, be quite certain that scientific beliefs never conform to ideological interests. One could mention here a strand in the feminist critique of some research especially in biology, where it has been argued the patriarchal and misogynous ideology has influenced the content of what appeared to be topic-neutral investigations. See Tuana (1989).

argued above (§2) that any voluntary belief has to be located among other already accepted beliefs, so that it inherits, as it were, the quality of aiming at truth from those other beliefs. I will now argue that one can use a broadly speaking Popperian (1959) methodology with a Gombrowiczian correction to show how especially contrarious beliefs may aim at truth though not as directly as L. Nowak (2000) would have it.

(i) Let us accept that Popper's methodology is basically right. The task before the ideal scientist is, first, to think of all the possible theories that could explain a given domain and, second, to try to falsify them. In the limit, all except one theory will be falsified, the true one.

(ii) No scientist is an ideal scientist. In the first instance, no actual scientist would have the time (not to mention other limitations) to think of all the possible theories. However, it is the duty of actual scientists to try to approach the ideal as much as they can. One way in which to do this is by trying to think of as many theories as possible. The more theories we, as a scientific community, propose and the more of them we falsify, the closer we are to the goal of eliminating all false theories.

It is here that we stumble upon the solution to our puzzle. In thinking up new theories — even ones that are going to turn out to be false — we participate in the research practice whose aim is to achieve the truth. Voluntary beliefs could thus aim at truth in this global sense of being part of a global research strategy aimed at truth. Contrarious beliefs are no exception.

(iii) To see the special role for contrarious beliefs in a scientific research practice one would have to understand not so much certain facts about our limited natures but rather certain facts about our herd nature, as Gombrowicz would have it. We have an uncanny inclination to repeat clichés and platitudes, to subordinate ourselves to dominating intellectual fashions, to admire the views of the famous and the powerful, and if we dare to put forward some novel views, their novelty usually consists in some small deviations from the thoughts that overtake us. Note that if this is the case then we are in principle not the sort of creatures that can pursue a Popperian type of methodology (see also Kuhn 1962). For we are incapable of thinking up

all the possible theories since our imaginations are completely captured by the status quo, i.e. by those theories that are dominant. Instead of freely exploring the space of all possible theories, we are tied by our herd nature to explore the orbits of what is currently fashionable.

It is thus that we can finally understand the epistemological sense of contrariness. Given our herd nature, we require something like the ability to think contrarious thoughts to fully explore the space of possibilities. In fact, we can understand how such an ability actually plays a central role in our collective *pursuit of truth*. This is not to say, however, that contrarious beliefs have a privileged position with respect to truth, that they somehow have a greater chance of being true. It might, of course, happen that some contrarious belief will in fact turn out to be true. But it might likewise happen that some uncontrarious belief will in fact turn out to be true. In such a case, one might think, that the courage and the strength required to think contrarious thoughts, to organize scientific knowledge around them, was pointless. But this would be an illusion. The effort of contrarious thinkers is never lost — even if their theories actually move away from, rather than toward, the truth. For it is only thanks to them that we can be certain (as certain as we can be) that we are considering more theoretical possibilities than we would otherwise be prone to consider. Whether Leszek Nowak's contrariness has brought us closer to the truth or further away from it, time will show.

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