

## WHEN INCONSISTENCY IS LOGICALLY IMPOSSIBLE

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We cannot specify any individual's ensemble of belief by reference to a set of logically possible worlds for the good reason that inconsistency in one's opinions is all too possible, and even familiar, both when it comes to believing each of a set of propositions logically incapable of joint truth and even when it comes to believing a single proposition that is demonstrably contradictory. At the opposite extreme, it isn't uncommon to hear it denied that any contradiction whatever is *logically* impossible to believe. Alvin Goldman, for instance, writes that no proposition (hence no contradiction's negation) is *logically* impossible to understand without believing:

"Any proposition, we may assume, has two or more components that are somehow organized or juxtaposed. To understand the proposition one must 'grasp' the components and their juxtaposition. Now in the case of *complex* logical truths, there are (human) psychological operations that suffice to grasp the components and their juxtaposition but do not suffice to produce a belief that the proposition is true. But can't we at least *conceive* of an analogous set of psychological operations even for simple logical truths, operations which perhaps are not in the repertoire of human cognizers but which might be in the repertoire of some conceivable beings? That is, can't we conceive of psychological operations that would suffice to grasp the components and componential-juxtaposition of these simple propositions but do not suffice to produce *belief* in the propositions? I think we can conceive of such operations. Hence, for any proposition you choose, it will be possible for it to be understood without being believed."<sup>(1)</sup>

<sup>(1)</sup> Alvin I. Goldman in "What is Justified Belief?", in *Justification and Knowledge, New Studies in Epistemology*, edited by George S. Pappas (Dordrecht, 1979), page 4. (To understand any contradiction's negation without believing it would, of course, involve understanding the contradiction in question without disbelieving it. And presumably Goldman would be willing to maintain that, where understanding a proposition without disbelieving it is logically possible thanks to the conceivable psychological mechanism that he invokes, in

Indeed it must be conceded that the burden of proof does rest with whoever would assert that certain propositions really are logically impossible for anyone to believe. My purpose here is to bear that burden by giving some reasons for distinguishing at any rate a "direct contradiction" — the conjunction of a proposition with its negation — from whatever contradictory propositions it is *not* logically inconsistent to affirm that somebody believes. In "Cognitive Synonymy",<sup>(2)</sup> I sought to lay the basis for drawing the distinction in general between contradictions which are, and which are not, logically impossible to believe. Here, I am concerned only with "direct contradictions".

(It is important to take note of the difference between believing a particular *proposition* and merely believing a particular *declarative sentence to be true* — i.e., to express a true proposition. Where one's command of language is imperfect, it is quite possible to believe a proposition to be true without considering true every — or any — sentence which actually expresses it in that language, or again to regard a sentence as being true without actually believing the proposition which it in fact expresses.<sup>(3)</sup>)

If "disbelieving" a proposition means believing what its negation asserts, the logical impossibility of believing any direct contradiction follows immediately from these two premises:

- (1) It is logically impossible to believe any conjunction without believing each conjunct

and

those circumstances actually believing the proposition will not be *logically* ruled out either.)

On the other hand, for a position very similar to that which is defended here, see Richard Foley, "Is It Possible to Have Contradictory Beliefs?", in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, X, *Studies in the Philosophy of Mind*, edited by Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein (Minneapolis, 1986), pages 327-355.

<sup>(2)</sup> *Dialectica*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (1980), pages 183-203. That paper is mainly devoted to rebutting W.V. Quine's case against the concept of *synonymy*, as ordinarily understood.

<sup>(3)</sup> In fact, as Richard Foley notes (*ibid.*, pages 344-349), it *need* not be any shortfall in linguistic competence (as ordinarily understood) that accounts for individuals' failure to recognize exactly what propositions are expressed even by sentences to which they assent and thereby accounts for somebody's (sincerely) assenting to two sentences as true which in fact express directly contradictory propositions. On occasion, perhaps even a competent English-speaker needs to be only slightly flustered to think, for instance, that both "I have a cousin" and "No one is a child of a sibling of a parent of mine" are true things to say.

- (2) It is logically impossible to believe and disbelieve the same proposition simultaneously.

Presumably only (2) could be controversial.

Depth psychology, for example, could lead one to deny (2) on the grounds that somebody might simultaneously believe a proposition “at one level” of consciousness and disbelieve it “at another level”. This would have to be distinct from believing the proposition while thinking that one doesn’t believe it, or thinking that one believes it while not actually believing it, or even while disbelieving it. It would also have to be distinct from believing what the proposition asserts when it comes to one subject-matter but not another — however obvious the implausibility of its really holding good in the one area but not the other might be were the question ever to receive genuine attention. However, it may be hoped that the arguments for (2) given below could persuade even the most ardent depth psychologist at least of the soundness of deriving the logical impossibility of believing a direct contradiction from the following two premises, in substitution for (1) and (2):

- (1') It is logically impossible to believe a conjunction *at any level of consciousness* without believing each conjunct *at that level of consciousness*

and

- (2') It is logically impossible to believe and disbelieve the same proposition simultaneously *at the same level of consciousness*.

Is it really possible, without being *literally* “of two minds”, to believe conflicting propositions in virtue of localized internal states somehow disconnected from each other psychologically? At any rate, even if it is, it clearly is not logically possible to do this while at the same time psychologically connecting the belief states to the extent of actually believing the conjunction of those propositions.

Now for the arguments against the logical possibility of anyone ever believing and disbelieving the same proposition simultaneously. This conclusion will follow at once if *belief* can be viewed as a net resultant of (possibly conflicting) inclinations-to-belief. Consider

- (3) It is logically impossible to believe a proposition without having an on balance favourable doxastic attitude towards what it asserts

and

- (4) It is logically impossible to disbelieve a proposition without having an on balance unfavourable doxastic attitude towards what it asserts.

On this showing, any person whose doxastic attitude towards what a proposition asserts is not on balance favourable won't count as believing the proposition. And any person whose doxastic attitude *is* on balance favourable won't count as disbelieving it. Many, even if they are not analytical behaviourists, will accept

- (5) It is logically impossible to believe a proposition without being disposed in consequence to act, under certain conditions, in a different way from the way one would act then if one disbelieved the proposition.

(For a person to be "disposed" to act in a particular way under certain conditions means here only that currently either the conditions are realized and the person is in fact acting that way or else the conditions are not realized but the person *would* act that way if they were.) Presumably it will be agreed that, if it is not logically possible to do X and to do Y simultaneously, then it is not logically possible simultaneously to be *disposed* to do X under certain conditions and also *disposed* to do Y under those conditions. On that basis, (5) will be sufficient for (2).

If these considerations are *not*, after all, enough to shift the burden of proof back on to the shoulders of those who deny that any proposition is logically impossible to believe, why not?

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