Managing Dialogue in terms of Belief and Acceptance

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Abstract

The focus of study is a dialogue situation in which one party holds that *P* while the other holds that *~P*. A simple way to establish harmony between the parties in dialogue is to insist that each should include the other's point of view. This is unsatisfactory because it results in an inconsistent set of beliefs. Clarity is essential, therefore, on how to deal with inconsistency. In this paper, I will proceed in two steps. In the first, I will indicate how some attempts at trying to manage contradictions in terms of ontology remain unsatisfactory. In the second step, I will introduce and evaluate another way in terms of belief and acceptance. I make an original application of L.J. Cohen's distinction between belief and acceptance, the former being a matter of feeling, the latter a matter of policy in reasoning.

We often consider dialogue an interaction between two individuals or groups with different opinions about something. In simple terms, the two parties in constructive dialogue engage in conversation so as to become more transparent to each other, and, through that very process, to themselves. If the difference of opinion is not resolved, or is not put aside as irrelevant, it can often be reduced to a set of statements that express a contradiction. After some time, it becomes obvious that one party holds that *P* while the other holds that *~P*. From this simple observation, it follows that the usual attempt to establish harmony between the different parties in dialogue by insisting that each should include the other's point of view is unsatisfactory. The problem is that enlarging one's horizon to include the other's point of view very often results in an inconsistent set of beliefs, namely a set that includes both *P* and *~P*. In any discussion on dialogue, therefore, it is crucial to be clear about the nature of contradictions in one's set of beliefs and to have some strategy about how to handle inconsistency. In this paper, I will proceed in two steps. In the first, I will indicate how some attempts at trying to manage contradictions in terms of ontology remain unsatisfactory. In the second step, I will introduce and evaluate another way in terms of belief and acceptance.

Managing Contradictions in terms of Ontology

Standard logic cannot handle inconsistency. The major threat from admitting contradiction within a set of beliefs is that of explosion. As can be shown quite easily, when a set of propositions contains even one single proposition together with its

negation, then it will be possible to deduce any proposition whatsoever.[1] This kind of explosion occurs not only in the case of sets of beliefs whose elements are distinct and clearly evident. It occurs also for sets of beliefs considered in conjunction with all the logical consequences of those beliefs. It is customary to call a set of axiomatic beliefs together with all their logical consequences a theory. So even a theory is prone to explosion because digging below the surface of the axioms will enable the deduction of practically any proposition whatsoever.

It is interesting to recall Aristotle's discussion on contradiction, in *Metaphysics* Book Γ, which contains the famous line: 'A thing cannot at the same time be and not be' (Aristotle 1941, 996b30). This formulation is related to the being of a thing, rather than to what one can say about the thing. Following Aristotle, many have considered the principle of contradiction as valid for all being. In Aristotelian metaphysics, it is considered a primary principle, an indispensable tool, because it allows the apprehension of being in its intrinsic intelligibility. Since it excludes its own negation, it cannot be denied, but neither can it be derived. This means that, for a standard ontology, such as the one assumed by many philosophers in the course of history ranging from Aristotle to the early Wittgenstein, there are two laws. The first, the law of excluded middle, holds that, of a pair of propositions *P* and *~P*, *at least* one obtains. This fact is classically expressed by the phrase *tertium non datur*. The second law, that of contradiction holds that, of a pair of propositions *P* and *~P*, *at most* one obtains. Moreover, there are indications that Aristotle wasn't ignorant of the explosive nature of even a single inconsistency in one's belief system. For instance, he claims that 'if words have no meaning, our reasoning with one another, and indeed with ourselves, has been annihilated; for it is impossible to think of anything if we do not think of one thing' (Aristotle 1941, 1006b 8-10; cf.: Thomas Aquinas 1964-1981, 1a 2ae, Q 94, art. 2; Dancy 1975).

The upshot is that standard logic is explosive in the presence of inconsistency. In other words, inconsistency is not a matter of degree. You cannot have some of it, or more of it. One instance of inconsistency within a theory contaminates and destabilises the system completely.

This observation, however, does not help much in my project of giving an account of the dialogue situation in its complexity. In normal practice, an individual often seems capable of endorsing a set of beliefs that is rendered inconsistent because of that individual's inclusion of another individual's beliefs. Normal people are somewhat immune to logical explosion. They seem capable of containing various kinds of inconsistency within their belief systems. Their rationality seems to have a certain flexibility that helps them put such inconsistencies on hold, as it were, until further information is available.

It was probably such everyday skills that gave rise to some peculiar remarks in the writings of the later Wittgenstein. For instance, during one of his early discussions with members of the Vienna Circle, he is claimed to have made the following prediction: 'I am prepared to predict that there will be mathematical investigations of calculi containing contradictions and people will pride themselves on having emancipated themselves from consistency too.' (Goldstein 1989, 540). In his *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, he writes: 'But you can't allow a contradiction to stand: Why not? We do sometimes use this form in our talk, of course not often – but

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[1] Starting from the premise P that A & ~A, one can see how any other proposition follows because of the following simple argument. For all A, A $\Rightarrow$ (A or B). From P, however, we hold also that ~A. (A or B) & ~A $\Rightarrow$ B. Therefore we can conclude that B, for any B whatsoever.

one could imagine a technique of language in which it was a regular instrument. It might for example be said of an object in motion that it existed and did not exist in this place; change might be expressed by means of a contradiction' (Wittgenstein 1967, V 8). [2]

Following Wittgenstein's suggestion, some have tried to manage inconsistency by constructing what may be called a hyper-ontology (Rescher *et al.* 1980). The basic idea is to have an ontology that is perforated at some points. This means that, as regards these points, one can neither hold that P nor that $\sim P$. Such an artificial world can also have another feature. It could also be superimposed, in the sense that it contains points about which one can hold both that P and that $\sim P$. This is an ontological way of ensuring that contradictions do not contaminate the entire system. Although interesting and perhaps applicable in some areas of modern science, it leaves a lot to be desired in the way of practical usefulness. The hyper-ontology it depends on seems to be completely *ad hoc*.[3]

A better way of examining how to deal with inconsistency is in terms of propositional attitudes. Are there various ways in which we endorse a proposition?

Managing Contradictions in terms of Belief and Acceptance

My proposal is to see whether drawing a distinction between belief and acceptance can be useful in understanding dialogue situations that boil down to a contradiction. One of the best studies of belief and acceptance to my knowledge is that of L. Jonathan Cohen (1992). He starts by situating René Descartes and David Hume as the two opposite extreme positions, the former holding that we acquire knowledge ultimately by a voluntary judgement, the latter, on the contrary, holding that knowledge is acquired by involuntary growth of cognitive feeling. The correct distinction between belief and acceptance must take into consideration the complexity of the issue sliding neither to one side nor the other. The essential difference occurs because belief needs to be seen as a disposition to feel that a proposition is true. for instance, I may have a disposition to feel that eating too many peanuts will cause me heartburn. Another way of talking about this state of affairs is to say that I believe peanuts cause me heartburn, and I show this in my behaviour. On the contrary, acceptance needs to be seen as a deliberate act, or a policy for reasoning, for example the policy of considering a given proposition a premise for further reasoning. '"Belief" carries no conceptual implications about reasoning, "acceptance" carries none about feelings' (Cohen 1992, 5).

According to this distinction, since belief is a disposition, it may be invisible until the appropriate moment comes when it becomes evident. My disposition to feel that a given proposition is true or false is only evident when my attention is turned to that proposition. For instance, when faced with something I never directly thought of before, say when faced with the proposition 'the world contains a lot of evil but ultimately truth and goodness will prevail', then I will discover where my disposition leads me. It may lead me to realise that I believe it, or it may lead me to realise that I don't. Acceptance is different. It is a deliberate and conscious operation of choosing a proposition as a starting point. This deliberate act can even go against my personal feelings. Accepting that P means taking P as a premise; in other words, taking P as

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[2] Wittgenstein's remarks bearing on contradiction are scattered in a number places. For example Wittgenstein 1967, II 78, 81, 82; III 56-60; III 87; V 12, 13, 21, 26, 28. For further details, see Priest *et al.* 1989; Priest *et al.* 1993; Priest 1998.

[3] I discuss the prospects of their proposal with respect to Wittgenstein's project in Caruana *forthcoming*.

true for the sake of the argument, whether one feels that *P* is true or not.

In a few paragraphs of Cohen's chapter one §6, there is a mention of the problem of inconsistency in terms of belief and acceptance. It is this part that interests me most. In a nutshell, Cohen claims that belief that *P* and belief that ~*P* can co-exist within the same individual as a turmoil of feelings or inclinations. This is only human, given our considerable variety of natural tendencies fixed upon us by previous educational conditioning. On the contrary, acceptance that *P* and acceptance that ~*P* can co-exist within the same individual only when that person is manifestly lacking in rationality. Since acceptance is voluntary, such a person will come across as someone annoyingly absurd. In Cohen's own words: 'Because belief is not deductively closed, it is not necessarily an intellectual disaster if a person does have an inconsistency between some of his beliefs. But for acceptance the analogous situation may be disastrous' (Cohen, 1992, 36).

Consider now a simple case of dialogue, say, between her and me. We disagree on the truth-value of *P*. I take *P* to be true. She, as far as I can see, takes *P* to be false. My basic proposal is to uncover the subtle but important difference between the two situations:

  (S1)   I accept that she *believes* that ~*P*
  (S2)   I accept that she *accepts* that ~*P*

These are just two of the many possible combinations. For each protagonist of the dialogue, there are two possible options, made available by the introduction of the distinction between belief and acceptance. Of all the permutations possible, the most significant pair is the one represented by S1 and S2.

S1 is practically saying that I accept that her disagreement with me issues from a belief. It issues, therefore, from her disposition to feel that *P* is false. Describing my situation as S1 enables me to hold that she holds that ~*P* not because she deliberately considers it a premise for her reasoning, but because of the way she is conditioned by her upbringing. S1 offers me, therefore, the possibility of thinking how she endorses ~*P* without being directly and consciously responsible of doing so.

The appearance of a clear contradiction threatening my endorsing what she holds is not there any longer. Such a naked contradiction emerges only when the situation is described as S2. It emerges because both my propositional attitude towards *P* and hers about ~*P* are on the same level, namely that of acceptance. Accepting both *P* and ~*P* will result in clear inconsistency. As distinct from this, the possibility described by S1 implies that dialogue may still continue.

What are the merits of this proposal? There are at least two. Firstly, it does away with the worry of how to contain a contradiction within a set of beliefs. *A fortiori*, it does not need to understand dialogue in terms of a hyper-ontology designed specifically to show how one and the same rational person may hold both that *P* and that ~*P*. Secondly, it introduces a new level of dialogue, namely the level of self-examination. One is encouraged to see whether one's contribution to a dialogue is made up of propositions one believes or of propositions one accepts. In other words, it highlights the possibility that some aspects of a dialogue situation may be better understood on the level of feelings. Other aspects may be better understood on the level of strategies in reasoning. In the example above, as described by S1, I may hope that she realises that her believing that ~*P* should be overcome. In a parallel but opposite fashion, the same thing may be hoped by her about my realising that some of my beliefs should be overcome, if and when I become more aware of what I should rationally accept as a good starting point for correct reasoning.

This account of a dialogue situation is richer than the one I started with. It is

thus more responsible to real-life situations. It certainly does not tell us how to resolve a given conflict of opinions. It nevertheless allows interesting, non-explosive ways of managing such a conflict.

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