

Of course, to get these results we are still making assumptions about the behavior of ρ in infinite sets, but I take it that the assumptions required are quite abstemious.²

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A Note on Kripke's Puzzle about Belief

In his recent contribution to this gazette, Jesse Steinberg (2007: “Pierre may be ignorant, but he’s not irrational”, *The Reasoner* 1(3): 2-3) discusses the following rendition of Kripke’s puzzle, due to Sosa:

1. Pierre is rational. (assumption)
2. Pierre, on reflection, assents to “Londres est jolie”. (assumption)
3. “London is pretty” is a translation of “Londres est jolie”. (assumption)
4. Pierre, on reflection, assents to “London is not pretty”. (assumption)
5. Pierre believes that London is pretty. (2, 3, D)
6. Pierre believes that London is not pretty. (4, D)
7. Pierre believes that London is pretty and Pierre believes that London is not pretty. (5, 6, I)
8. If Pierre believes that London is pretty and Pierre believes that London is not pretty, then Pierre has contradictory beliefs. (analytic?)
9. Pierre has contradictory beliefs. (7, 8, MP)
10. If Pierre has contradictory beliefs, then Pierre is not rational. (analytic?)
11. Pierre is not rational. (9, 10, MP)

Steinberg aims to provide a solution to this purported paradox, by denying premise (10). According to him, the mere fact that an agent has contradictory beliefs is not a sufficient condition to count that agent as irrational. Steinberg supports this claim with the example of Tim, a student who rightfully believes that the form of a certain argument (*modus ponens*) is valid, but then fails to recognise the validity of a different argument of the same form. Now, Steinberg asks: “Would we consider Tim to be irrational? Tim is surely not astute. One might be tempted to call him obtuse, but he is certainly not irrational. [...] What would make Tim irrational is his believing a contradiction, his being aware that he

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believes that contradiction, and his obstinacy in continuing to believe the contradiction even in the face of this awareness.” (2007: 2-3)

The intended moral of this example is that an agent *A* might have contradictory beliefs and yet continue to be rational. According to Steinberg that may happen if (i) *A* has two contradictory beliefs, (ii) *A* is ignorant of having beliefs that are contradictory, and (iii) *A* is disposed, or able, to revise his belief system upon becoming aware of the contradiction.

My intention here is not to criticise this suggestion. Though some further qualification may be needed (e.g., to the effect that *A*’s ignorance must not be due to any obvious fault in *A*’s reasoning capacities), the idea that rational agents might have contradictory beliefs is not so unintuitive, and has in fact received compelling support from various philosophers (e.g., Dummett 1973: *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, London: Duckworth).

What I do intend to argue, in effect, is that this idea is not necessary—and, indeed, not even adequate—for the task of solving Kripke’s puzzle. To see this, let us follow Steinberg’s suggestion and grant that Pierre is ignorant, but not irrational. In other words, Pierre has contradictory beliefs, but is unaware of the contradiction, and therefore (at least potentially) rational. Now the question is: What is Pierre actually ignorant of? Presumably, it is the fact that there is only one city which he calls ‘Londres’ in French and ‘London’ in English. Obviously, there is no irrationality involved in this cognitive shortcoming: one may fully rationally employ different idiolects, without having to know all the correspondences (i.e., standard translations) between those idiolects. But let us imagine next that Pierre somehow learns that the names ‘Londres’ and ‘London’ in fact denote the same city and reports his discovery (of an *a posteriori* piece of knowledge) in French: “Incredible! Après tout, Londres est London!” Now, applying Kripke’s translation principle, together with his remark that the translation of ‘Londres’ as ‘London’ “[i]s a standard one, learnt by students together with other standard translations of French into English” (Kripke 1979: “A Puzzle about Belief”, in *Meaning and Use*, p. 128), we should have no qualms about translating Pierre’s words into English as: “Incredible! After all, London is London!” Yet, it seems pretty clear that this translation would be inadequate, since it would have Pierre foolishly rejoicing in the discovery of a trivial a priori identity statement—which is clearly not what his French utterance reports.

This suggests to me that in cases like Pierre’s—i.e., when the speaker is unaware of certain facts about translation between idiolects—our own translation of the speaker’s utterances should be guided, and appropriately constrained, not only by what Kripke calls the translation principle, but also by a principle of charity which implies, among other things, that we should aim

at preserving both the truth-value of the speaker's assertions, and their cognitive content. (There are other imaginary examples that support this diagnosis. Suppose, for instance, that Pierre is blindfoldedly taken to a (fictional) *Quartier Français* in London. Without knowing where he is, Pierre sees a placard that reads: "Bienvenus à Londres!". As he enjoys the neighbourhood a lot, he says to himself: "Allors, ça c'est Londres! C'est une ville merveilleuse! J'aimerais bien vivre ici! Quel dommage que j'habite à Londres!" If we were to translate Pierre's assertions in the standard way, we would get the following result: "So, this is London! What a wonderful city! I'd love to live here! Too bad I live in London!" It goes without saying that this is not an adequate translation of Pierre's words, since it has him contradict himself, which is not what he's doing in French.)

The preceding remarks, if correct, suggest a different way of tackling Kripke's puzzle, which enables us to block the apparent paradox before it even gets off the ground. If the translation of 'Londres' (in Pierre's idiolect) as 'London' is unwarranted, as I have argued, then premise (3) of the argument is false (N.B. as applied to Pierre's idiolect, not as a rule of standard translation). And this, in turn, blocks the derivation of line (5). Not only is Pierre "merely ignorant and not some sort of bizarre irrational being", as Steinberg argues. He is not even committed to any contradiction in the first place.

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§4 EVENTS

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CSL 2007: Computer Science Logic, 11-15 September, 2007, Lausanne (CH).

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AIPL-07: Workshop on Artificial Intelligence Planning and Learning, Providence, Rhode Island, September 22, 2007, organized in conjunction with the International Conference on Automated Planning and Scheduling (ICAPS-07).

SYMCON'07: The Seventh International Workshop on Symmetry and Constraint Satisfaction Problems, Providence, RI, USA, September 23rd 2007.

ICAPS 2007: Workshop on Planning in Games, Providence, Rhode Island, USA, September, 23, 2007.