

## **Precis of *Belief, Inference, and the Self-Conscious Mind***

Eric Marcus  
Auburn University

(forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*)

More money was missing from my wallet this morning, from which I infer that my son is stealing again. For me to reach this conclusion, I've got to possess the concepts required to think the thoughts: 'stealing', etc. And *what* is thought must be thought in such a way that I can recognize the implication. I must also hold relevant background beliefs, e.g., no one else had the opportunity, money doesn't just disappear, and so forth. Finally, all of these beliefs must be integrated. If they are fragmented—if perhaps I find the hypothesis too painful to entertain and so repress it—I do not make the inference. The topic of BISCAM is the nature of this integration. What is it for beliefs to be *together in mind*, as opposed to fragmented? And what, more generally, is it for a pair of beliefs to belong to *a single mind*?

Back to my example: My troubled son must have slid back into his old, larcenous ways. As much as I'd like to believe otherwise, there's just no way around it. He must be stealing again. The sense that a proposition *must* be true, whether welcome or not, is the experience of what I call *rational necessity*. Given the facts (as I take them to be), the conclusion presents itself to me as incontestable. In this way, one's consciousness of what must be true constitutes a bond between one's beliefs in some premises and one's belief in a conclusion.

Consider now the following progression:

- (1) Judgment that p
- (2) Judgment that p implies q
- (3) Inference from p to q.

It will seem obvious to many that each of these is a distinct phase in reasoning. After all, the inference cannot consist simply of a judgment that the premise is true, since one can fail to recognize that the premise implies a certain conclusion. And even if one does recognize the implication, one might not make the inference. It is possible for someone to believe that *p*, know that *p* implies that *q*, and yet fail to respond by believing *q* (even if one doesn't surrender one's belief that *p*). This is the source of the Tortoise's resistance in his dialogue with Achilles, as envisioned by Lewis Carroll. Responding to a reason seems to go beyond the judgment that serves as the reason, even in combination with the judgment that the reason supports responding in the relevant way. For it remains a possibility that the subject does not respond in the relevant way.

What explains why I *don't* draw a conclusion from a known premise? Many things. I may simply have failed to recognize that *q* is implied by *p*, a failure which in turn might be explained by many different sorts of things. I might lack information. I might just not be sharp enough to deduce it. Or I might have failed to consider the question of *q*; it just didn't occur to me. Then again, it might not have *just* failed to occur to me. There could also be a less innocent explanation: self-deception, denial, repression, or the like. These conditions also might explain why, even if I *do* know that *q* follows from *p*, I have not put this together with my knowledge of *p*. But, from the fact that we sometimes judge *p* to be true, and even know that *q* follows, but still don't make the inference to *q*, it doesn't follow that making the inference is in every case a separate mental act from judging *p* to be true and believing that *q* follows.

I try to explain how this is possible. Insofar as we affirm (or deny) in light of what else we believe, we employ the concepts of implication (or incompatibility). And it is, I argue, a highly plausible minimal requirement on representing any proposition as

true (in the characteristic manner of humans) that one also represents that nothing implied by it can be false and nothing inconsistent with it can be true. This is why no one fails to understand what an interlocuter is up to when they say “Oh so since you believe p, you must also [or must not] believe q.” My affirmation of the conclusion of inference reflects my knowledge that what is implied by a truth must itself be true; my denial of what is incompatible with a truth reflects my knowledge that what is inconsistent with a truth must be false. As such, knowledge of *these* truths, which I call the *implication principle* and the *exclusion principle*, must have a special status.

I argue that the implication and exclusion principles are believed by every rational agent who believes anything. No rational agent believes anything who doesn't therein appreciate that in so believing one must accept what follows and reject what's incompatible. Indifference to these fundamental logical principles ultimately makes understanding someone impossible—not because we view it as an obstruction in the expression of their beliefs—but because we have lost any reason for thinking that the relevant noises *are* serious and sincere expressions of belief.

Suppose that I know both that p and that p implies q, and that I have put these two facts together in my mind. No confusion, no ignorance, no lack of integration, etc. I see clearly and distinctly that p, and that p implies q. I have as much confidence and justification as humanly possible. Under these circumstances, it is impossible for me *not* to believe q. In believing the premises, I believe the conclusion. From my point of view, given what I know (or at least take myself to know) there is no space between believing the premises and believing the conclusion. q *must* be true, as I might put it. One cannot clearly and distinctly represent a proposition as true while failing to hold true what we clearly and distinctly know to be an implied proposition, and so one cannot

be understood as doing so. I *recognize* that the conclusion follows and cannot help but draw the inference. To recognize (in that sense) that something, q, follows from what I already believe (and will not surrender), is therein to believe q. Analogously, to recognize that q is incompatible with what I already believe (and will not surrender) is therein to deny q. The essence of rationality lies in this *therein*. It is, I argue, in part a matter of understanding what one believes well enough to know what else, in the light of what's true, must or can't be true. And it is in part a matter of the integration of these beliefs. How to understand this integration?

I approach this question by reflecting first on the circumstances in which beliefs are *not* together in mind. Suppose I believe that my childhood was traumatically miserable, but I find it painful to think of it and have gradually repressed this belief. When asked whether I have had a happy life, I insist that I have. Because this belief is repressed, I fail to draw certain consequences, e.g., that I might benefit from counseling. Although I believe that people who have suffered childhood trauma should seek counseling, I do not put this together with my knowledge that *I* have suffered childhood trauma. I hold both of these beliefs, but they are disconnected. What must happen in order for them to be integrated?

In rough outline, I answer as follows: Insofar as I believe something, I have the ability to avow it—to say knowledgeably but not on the basis of self-observation, *that* I believe it. But to have the ability to x does not entail that one can currently x, as the ability might be masked. And to say that a belief is alienated due to e.g., repression is to say precisely that. Insofar as I have repressed my belief that my childhood was miserable, I cannot at the moment exercise my ability to avow it. The goal of therapy might then be to remove the mask. It is in this sense that the source of my doxastic self-

knowledge is simply the belief itself—even though there might be obstacles to my bringing the belief to consciousness.

Ordinary doxastic self-knowledge is tied up with the salience (to me) of p's truth. Repression is a response to the painfulness of a truth, but the price of a truth's being obscured is the availability of the corresponding belief to serve in reasoning and, not unrelatedly, the masking of our ability to knowledgeably self-ascribe it in a distinctively first-personal way. So long as my belief is alienated, the painful truth is out of mind. This means that I am not conscious of the truth of that belief, and therefore I cannot enjoy the consciousness of this truth that makes me conscious of the other truths that follow from it, and also makes it possible for me to 'just say' what I believe. What is ready-to-speak in this sense is precisely what's in mind. We speak from the point of view of those beliefs that are in mind together. And all of those things that are ready to speak are what's in mind together.

Sensitivity to reasons (qua reasons) includes the togetherness in mind of ground and grounded; it is thus that one can believe the conclusion *in* believing the premises. This reflects, in the ideal case, my understanding that given the truth of the premises, the conclusion must itself be true. Now we see also that self-knowledge helps to constitute the togetherness of these beliefs. To be *in mind*, a belief must be readily self-ascribable knowledgeably. It is thus by first thinking through the conditions for the possibility of this kind of togetherness that I reach my conclusion regarding its source: self-consciousness.

The argument turns in part on a conception of the capacity of which individual beliefs are the exercise. Crucially, this capacity is not a merely mechanical disposition, nor is it a merely functional disposition. It is a rational capacity. Here's a rough sketch

of what I mean by this. A mechanical disposition, such as the fragility of a glass, grounds the following explanatory asymmetry: given the trigger, the manifestation requires no explanation. Of course it broke: it's fragile. But failure to manifest the disposition does require an explanation. How did *that* not break!?! A functional disposition, such as a flower's blooming in spring or an alarm clock's ringing at 7 am, grounds an analogous explanatory asymmetry. Given the trigger, the manifestation requires no explanation, whereas the failure to manifest does. It is these asymmetries that define the genus of disposition.<sup>1</sup>

The central difference between mechanical and functional dispositions is that the latter is evaluable, whereas the former is not. There is something amiss if the flower fails to bloom in spring or the alarm clock fails to ring. But it is a fluke, not a defect when a dropped glass fails to break. This is a difference in the sort of explanatory demand raised by the failure of different sorts of dispositions to manifest when triggered. If it is a mechanical disposition, we simply need an explanation for why what *ordinarily* happens failed to happen.

The human capacity for knowledge also exhibits this characteristic dispositional asymmetry. A false belief requires more explanation than a true one. Unlike flowers and alarm clocks, however, which are oblivious to the standards that define them, the source of the standard associated with our capacity to acquire knowledge—what makes it the case that it is *truth* that measures belief—is explained by its being a self-conscious capacity. *In* exercising the capacity, we fix what the success of that exercise would be—truth— by virtue of that very exercise representing itself as successful in this way.

---

<sup>1</sup> I expand on this sketch in Marcus (2012), §1.4.

It is because our capacity for knowledge is self-conscious that there is normally no transition from thinking of *p* as true to thinking of it as *to be believed* or from thinking of *p* as false to thinking of it as *to be disbelieved*. And so I cannot intelligibly insist that although a certain proposition is true (or false), that fact has no bearing on whether or not it would be correct (or incorrect) to believe it. This cannot be something that I simply have failed to learn about the nature of belief, as I might simply have failed to learn that in believing, I make use of my brain.

The inseparability (from the subject's point of view) of truth from correctness, on the one hand, and falsehood from error on the other, has the following consequence. A representation of a proposition as true or false is at the same time a representation of it as binding one, as imposing a certain sort of obligation on thinkers. To believe a proposition is to represent it as correct to believe. Furthermore, the subject of this obligation is the universal 'one'. Perhaps there are decisive reasons not linked to the relevant sense of 'correct' (say pragmatic reasons) for believing what is, in the relevant sense, to be disbelieved, or for disbelieving what is to be believed. But they do not undermine the correctness (in the relevant sense) of so believing or disbelieving. It is only because 'one' has this universal sense that there is also no space between thinking of a proposition as to be believed (in the relevant sense) and thinking of it as to be believed by *me*. It is already included, so speak, in the relevant *one*, that in thinking that *one* should believe (or disbelieve) a proposition that *I* should.

Above, I described the implication and incompatibility principles as presupposed in every belief. Insofar as truth and falsehood are identified with correctness and error, we can now also say this: To know that if *p* and *p* implies *q* are truths, then *q* must also be a truth is at the same to know that insofar as *p* and *p* implies *q* are to be believed, *q* is

also to be believed. But this principle includes a concept of a common subject of the rational attitudes. It is because *S* believes *p* and that very same subject *S* also believes that *p* implies *q* that *S* should believe *q*. It is the very one who believes the premises who is also obliged to believe the conclusion. When I employ the implication rule, my thought thus includes the idea of such a one: a rational being. It is only insofar as I identify a single subject of several beliefs that it makes sense to criticize anyone for failing to draw an obvious conclusion. Finally, to *make* an inference is at the same time to understand *oneself* as the common subject of the relevant beliefs. In other words, when it comes to rational agents, to make an inference is to see oneself as conforming to a doxastic obligation in virtue in part of being the common subject of all of the relevant beliefs.

What makes a belief *mine* is that I am able (perhaps only with time and help) to bring it together with other beliefs in a manner such that I become conscious of what else must or can't be true. In so doing, I recognize myself as a subject who is committed to believing what follows from *p* and to disbelieving what's inconsistent with it, i.e., as a rational creature. This is the source of the togetherness of beliefs in the rational mind. Consciousness of my being the single subject of my beliefs is what makes it the case that I am a single subject—that there is a one who cannot clear-headedly both believe that *p* and that *p* implies *q* and yet fail to believe that *q* and that that one is me. I grasp the unity of the subject from the 'inside' and this is what explains the existence of the 'inside'.



## Reference

Marcus, E. (2012). *Rational Causation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Marcus, E. (2021). *Belief, Inference, and the Self-Conscious Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.