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Unsuccessful Semantics

ROBERT B. BRANDOM

In a recent paper¹, J. T. Whyte has argued that the notions of truth, truth conditions, and the intentionality of propositional attitudes can be understood naturalistically, by appeal to the Ramsey principle:

- (R) A belief's truth condition is that condition which guarantees the fulfilment of any desire by the action which, combined with that desire, it would cause.

Of course my true belief that there are cookies in the cupboard may not lead to fulfilment of my desire to eat cookies if I also falsely believe that the cupboard is in the kitchen rather than the pantry. This sort of worry is accommodated by stipulating that wherever further beliefs are involved, what the principle tells us directly is the truth condition for the *conjunction* of the beliefs that are jointly responsible (together with desires) for the action.²

The fact that a condition along the lines of (R) must be modified to apply only to conjunctions of beliefs need not mean that truth conditions cannot be assigned to individual beliefs, however. The truth conditions of the belief that *p* can be thought of as the difference that its inclusion in a conjunction makes to the truth conditions of that conjunction. By considering conjunctions that differ from a given one only by dropping *p*, or by substituting some other belief for it, its contribution can be factored out. (Properly to show that this would work would require a demonstration that the results of such a procedure do not vary with the conjunction one begins with, but this difficulty may be passed over here.)

Even understood as applying to conjunctions of all our action-motivating beliefs, however, principle (R) would not seem to cover all the cases where we would ordinarily say that true beliefs lead to unsuccessful actions. For I can be thwarted as much by what I don't know as by what I falsely believe. My true beliefs that there are cookies in the cupboard and that the cupboard is in the pantry will be of no avail, for instance, if I am unaware that wet weather has so swelled the cupboard door that it cannot be opened. In general, ignorance is no less a threat than error to

¹ J. T. Whyte, 'Success Semantics', *Analysis*, 50 (June 1990) 149–57; followed up by 'The Normal Rewards of Success', *Analysis*, 51 (March 1991) 65–73.

² 'Success Semantics', p. 151. The considerations advanced below show that Whyte is committed to auxiliary hypotheses being involved in *every* piece of practical reasoning that leads to action.

the putative guarantee of practical success that (R) – even as modified – seeks to identify with truth.

A possible response to this difficulty (suggested by what Whyte says) is to regiment explanations of action so as to treat ignorance as a form of error. My attempt to open the cupboard door might be taken to manifest an implicit belief that wet weather has not swelled it fast; in this way my failure could be attributed to a false belief after all.

There are serious problems with this strategy. Consider how particular implicit beliefs might be attributed. There seem to be two possibilities. The reasoning concerning each particular possible impediment of which I may be unaware might depart from a premiss such as

- (a) If I had believed that the cupboard was stuck shut, I would not have tried to open it.

This is a plausible claim. Together with the auxiliary hypothesis that I tried to open the cupboard, it entails the conclusion

- (b) I did not believe that the cupboard was stuck shut.

But what the argument requires is rather

- (c) I believed that the cupboard was not stuck shut.

For concluding that (R) has not been violated requires that my action flowed from a false belief. Revising our talk about belief so that the move from (b) to (c) is not a non sequitur is a major undertaking, and it is not clear how it might be brought off.³

Noticing this difficulty brings to light the other alternative, which is to start instead with the

- (a') If I had not believed that the cupboard was not stuck shut, I would not have tried to open it.

Given that I did try to open the cupboard, this version has the desired consequence (c). The problem here is not with the inference, but with the premiss. It just is not clear that (a') is true. The reasons that might be offered for it turn out on closer inspection to be reasons rather for the weaker claim (a). Such plausibility as the stronger claim has rests on a tacit endorsement of an inference from not believing that *p* to believing that not-*p*. So this alternative also depends on the unsupported slide from some-

³ For instance, would such moves as the inference from 'It is possible that *S* believes that *p*,' to '*S* believes that it is possible that *p*,' (or from 'It will be the case that *S* believes that *p*,' '*S* believes that it will be the case that *p*,') also be underwritten, or would negation be distinguished in some principled way from other apparently similar sentential operators that do support this distinction of scope with respect to propositional attitudes?

thing corresponding to (b) to something corresponding to (c).

But even if one could convert potentially success-undermining ignorance into error in each particular case that comes to mind, that would not equip one with a formulation that covered all potential success-underminers. For any plan of action can go wrong in an indefinitely large number of ways. The defender of (R) is committed to being able to explain each failure as the result of some false belief on the part of the agent. It is quite implausible that I have particular beliefs concerning each of the possible problems: the cupboard having been nailed shut, moved, mined, encased in glass, shrunk to microscopic size, and so on. Whyte's line, presumably, would be to treat these multifarious possible defeating conditions wholesale, rather than retail, by attributing beliefs that entail their denial. This is to say that whenever an action is performed to satisfy a desire, we are to understand the set of beliefs on which it is based to include a belief to the effect that there are 'no impediments' ('Success Semantics', p. 151) to its success. If I am merely ignorant of the fact that weather has swelled the cupboard shut, this belief at least will actually be in error.

This strategy saves the principle that the failure of any action can be traced to the falsity of some belief on which it was based – but only by trivializing it. For the proposal amounts to this. Since, owing to the possibility of unforeseen circumstances, any conjunction of beliefs $B_1 \& B_2 \& \dots B_n$ that does not contain a 'no impediments' clause can fail to guarantee the success of an action A it produces, the conjunctions to which the modified principle (R) is taken to apply are to be in each case expanded by including the conditional belief 'If $B_1 \& B_2 \& \dots B_n$, then A (if performed) will be successful.' The expanded conjunction logically entails that A (if performed) will be successful. But this has nothing to do with the truth conditions of $B_1 \& B_2 \& \dots B_n$. And no formulation of the 'no impediments' clause that does not entail this conditional is strong enough to yield an expanded conjunction that does guarantee the success of the actions it motivates.

That all the burden of the guarantee of practical success supposedly vouchsafed by having true beliefs is being carried by the 'no impediments' condition emerges quite clearly when one asks how the truth conditions of this belief are to be determined by the methods of success semantics. (Whyte merely stipulates that a belief with the appropriate content be included in conjunctions as necessary – that is, when it is not already present. But how are its truth conditions, and so the stipulation itself, to be understood?) By itself, a 'no impediments' belief cannot guarantee the success of actions based on it. For if it is so understood as to entail all the beliefs $B_1, B_2, \dots B_n$ whose truth we are really interested in – that there are cookies in the cupboard, the cupboard is in the pantry, and so on – then

the account immediately collapses. So its truth conditions must be determined by 'factoring out' its contribution to conjunctions of beliefs that do motivate action.

But the very considerations that show the need for the inclusion of a 'no impediments' clause to begin with ensure that such factoring cannot be done. For if one drops that belief from a conjunction, the truth of the remaining beliefs will not guarantee the success of actions based on them, precisely because of the possibility of impediments of which one is ignorant. And for the same reason one cannot, instead of dropping it, substitute some other belief for it and observe the difference in what conditions must hold for the resulting conjunction to guarantee the truth of actions based on it. For any other belief, put in its stead, will not rule out the possibility of failure due to ignorance rather than false belief. So there is no way that the belief that there are no impediments to a certain plan of action can be assigned truth conditions by appeal to some variant of (R). (And it is worth noticing that the argument to this conclusion does not depend on the possibly tendentious identification of the conditional import of the 'no impediments' condition, three paragraphs back.)

The difficulty is not one of technical detail, but of fundamental principle. The trouble is that, intuitively moving as it may be, (R) is false on any possible reading – for its existential presupposition fails. The world is a precarious place, and our grip on it is incomplete. There simply is no condition on our beliefs that guarantees the success of any actions they might lead to. This general predicament manifests itself in Whyte's theory in the dilemma posed by two explanatory constraints: On the one hand, success semantics cannot succeed without employing some version of a 'no impediments' condition to turn actual ignorance into putative error. On the other hand, the question-begging character of any such condition means that there is no way to become entitled to such an appeal within the program of success semantics.

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