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Illogical, But Rational

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Stephen Schiffer (200x) says that Nathan Salmon and I are committed to the special-case consequence. He also says that it is possible for (1)-(3) to be true.

1. Jane understands and sincerely assents to ‘George Eliot is identical with Mary Ann Evans’.
2. Jane believes that Ralph believes that George Eliot is a man.
3. Jane believes that Ralph does not believe that Mary Ann Evans is a man.

Schiffer deduces a contradiction from (1)-(3) together with the special-case consequence and his version of Frege’s constraint. In reply, Salmon (200x) rejects the special-case consequence. I do too, for the reasons that Salmon gives. Schiffer, however, expects us to reject his version of Frege’s constraint, propose a certain modification of it, and justify the modification by claiming that modes of presentation are expressions in a language of thought (LOT).¹ Schiffer thinks that, even after these maneuvers, a serious problem for our theory remains. Though Salmon and I are not forced to make these maneuvers, I will here respond to the alleged remaining problem.

The alleged problem concerns a certain contrast between Ralph and Jane. Ralph assents to (4) and dissents from (5).

4. George Eliot is a man.
5. Mary Ann Evans is a man.

Jane assents to (6) and dissents from (7).

6. Ralph believes that George Eliot is a man.
7. Ralph believes that Mary Ann Evans is a man.

On a Millian view like Salmon's and mine, (4) and (5) express the same proposition and Ralph believes both it and its negation. Ralph can do so rationally because this proposition is presented to him under two modes of presentation. Similarly for Jane: the single proposition expressed by (6) and (7) is presented to Jane under two modes, and she can rationally believe that proposition under one mode while also believing its negation under another. But there is an important difference between Ralph and Jane, Schiffer says. Jane may rationally assent to (ID), while continuing to assent to (6) and dissent from (7).

ID. George Eliot is identical with Mary Ann Evans.

However, Ralph cannot rationally assent to (ID), while continuing to assent to (4) and dissent from (5). Another version of the alleged problem arises if we assume that modes of presentation are sentences in the LOT and the LOT is English. Ralph has sentence (4) and the negation of sentence (5) in his belief box. Jane has sentence (6) and the negation of sentence (7) in hers. Jane can rationally add sentence (ID) to her belief box, while Ralph cannot rationally add (ID) to his. Schiffer thinks that Millians cannot explain how this difference is possible.

If Schiffer is right, then there should be a sound argument from facts about Ralph's and Jane's belief boxes to the conclusion that Millianism is false; this argument should not appeal to the special-case consequence or Schiffer's version of Frege's constraint, for Schiffer thinks that the above-mentioned problem arises despite our anticipated reply to his deduction of a contradiction. Schiffer does not provide such an argument, but perhaps the following one captures his intent. If sentence S validly follows from a very small set of sentences Σ by a

simple, mentally untaxing inference, then no rational person simultaneously has the members of Σ and the negation of S in his belief box. (That is why Ralph cannot rationally have (4), (ID), and the negation of (5) in his belief box.) But if Millianism is true, then (7) follows from (6) and (ID) by a simple, mentally untaxing inference. So if Millianism is true, then Jane cannot rationally have (6), (ID) and the negation of (7) in her belief box. But clearly she can, so Millianism is false.²

I reply that the first premise is implausibly strong, for it rules out disagreements about the validity of simple arguments among rational people. Philosophers who hold standard views about English think that the argument forms $\lceil P, \text{ therefore } P \text{ or } Q \rceil$ and $\lceil Q, \text{ therefore if } P \text{ then } Q \rceil$ are valid. Beginning logic students are rational and understand these arguments, but often think they are invalid; they sometimes have instances of their premises and the negations of their conclusions in their belief boxes. We theorists can provide evidence for the validity of these arguments, but beginners are unaware of that evidence. The beginners' unawareness of this evidence allows them to rationally hold illogical beliefs.

Similarly, ordinary speakers are rational and understand belief ascriptions and identity sentences, but this alone does not assure that they will correctly judge the sentences' simple logical consequences. Millians have rather esoteric evidence for the validity of substitution (proper names lack descriptive content, speakers freely substitute co-referring simple indexicals in belief sentences, quantifying-in seems valid, and so on), but ordinary, rational speakers are unaware of it.

In fact, typical speakers are often aware of misleading evidence *against* Millianism. Jane may accept (and have in her belief box) something like Kripke's (1979) strong disquotation

principle. From it, and her observation that Ralph assents to (4) and dissents from (5), she may come to have (6) and the negation of (7) in her belief box. If she also has (ID) in her belief box, then she may rationally reject (8), and its corresponding inference rule.

8. If George Eliot is Mary Ann Evans, then anyone who believes that George Eliot is a man also believes that Mary Ann Evans is a man.

This may, in turn, lead Jane to have sentence (9) in her belief box.

9. The proposition (belief) that George Eliot is a man is distinct from the proposition (belief) that Mary Ann Evans is a man.

Now Millianism entails that Kripke's strong disquotation principle is false. Nevertheless, Jane may rationally accept it. For if she accepts it, then she will tend, in a large range of circumstances, to have (6) in her belief box iff Ralph has (4) in his; similarly for (7) and (5), and the negations of all of these pairs of sentences. This may (in turn) allow her, in a large range of circumstances, to formulate true predictions of Ralph's behavior, especially his verbal behavior. She may rationally take these true predictions to be evidence for the principle. (All of this can occur even if Jane never thinks about the BEL relation or Ralph's modes of presentation.) Therefore, Jane may rationally accept the strong disquotation principle, and so rationally accept (ID), (9), and the negation of (8), though these latter two sentences express logically contradictory propositions. Thus she can rationally reject Millian substitution. She can be illogical, but rational.

As for Ralph, I think (*pace* Schiffer) that it is not clear that he cannot rationally have (4), (ID), and the negation of (5) in his belief box. Whether he can may depend on his other beliefs. (For discussion of similar cases, see Braun and Saul 2002.) But it is admittedly more difficult to

see what (misleading) evidence could rationally sustain Ralph's illogical beliefs than Jane's illogical beliefs. That may well explain the intuitive contrast between Ralph and Jane.³

Bibliography

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Notes

1. I am happy to assume that modes of presentation are expressions in the LOT, provided we use ‘mode of presentation’ to refer strictly to the entities that serve as the third relata of the BEL relation. I also assume, with Schiffer, that a mode of presentation M for proposition P is a structured entity that contains, as constituents, modes of presentation of P ’s constituents. Salmon has informed me (in personal correspondence) that he does not accept these assumptions.
2. I discuss a similar argument in Braun 1998.
3. Thanks to Nathan Salmon for comments on an earlier draft, and to the editors of *Noûs* for this opportunity to reply to Schiffer’s paper.