



Change in View: Principles of Reasoning.

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Change in View: Principles of Reasoning. GILBERT HARMAN. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1986. Pp. ix, 147.

Harman's aim is not "to settle issues but to raise issues, . . . to show that . . . change in view [is] a subject worthy of serious systematic study" (p. 116). This makes for a stimulating but tantalizing book, full of provocative ideas but with plenty of loose ends, especially about implicit beliefs and reasoning.

Harman has long insisted that logic is the theory of argument, not the theory of reasoning. It is the theory of what follows from what, not the theory of what, given one's beliefs, to infer. No wonder, then, that logic cannot explain why it is utterly irrational to try to infer all the consequences of one's beliefs. Also, a rule like *modus ponens* is a rule of argument, not a rule for revising one's beliefs. It does not tell you what to infer; noticing what follows from what you believe can lead you to give up something you already believe. Thus reasoned revision of belief, unlike theorem-proving in logic, is not cumulative. Harman distinguishes "maxims of reflection," which "say what to consider before revising one's view, for example, that one should consider carefully all the alternatives, with vivid awareness of the relevant evidence" (p. 2), from "principles of revision." His approach to the latter is both normative and descriptive: in revising our beliefs, what we ought to do is constrained by what we can do, as evidenced by what we do do. Harman does not present lists of specific principles that we ought to follow or actually do follow, for he is more concerned to characterize them in general. They are, for example, "defeasible, holding only other things being equal" (p. 19), and because of this, as Harman deftly shows later (chap. 7), inferences to and from explanations are generally not deductive. Harman does formulate some general principles, which underwrite certain implicit commitments we commonly make.

Of special interest are certain metaprinciples, such as the picturesquely named Principle of Clutter Avoidance. It applies only to explicit beliefs: although one's implicit beliefs are innumerable, by being implicit they do not produce clutter. (For this reason, whereas explicit belief is an "all-or-nothing matter," inasmuch as assigning degrees (subjective probabilities) to explicit beliefs could lead to a combinatorial explosion, implicit belief is a matter of degree.) Implicit beliefs include not only those "immediately implied" by explicit beliefs but also certain commitments. For example, "in believing *P*, it may be that one implicitly believes one is justified in believing *P*" (p. 13), in the sense that one is committed to the latter. But just what, if anything, do such commitments involve psychologically?

This question is partially answered when we learn that Harman rejects what he calls the "foundations theory," according to which "one must keep track of one's original reasons for one's beliefs, so that one's ongoing beliefs have a justificational structure, some beliefs serving as reasons or justifications for others. . . . In this view a proposition cannot acquire justification simply by being believed" (p. 30). This view rejects the "principle of conservatism," unlike what Harman calls the "coherence theory." I wish that Harman had not bestowed on these two theories of belief revision the same names as those of traditional theories of justification, for they contrast in quite different ways

than do epistemological foundationalism and coherentism. For example, when Harman characterizes the foundations theory as saying that “one’s justification for believing something cannot be that one already believes it and that one’s beliefs in this area are reliable” (p. 30), he overlooks the version of epistemological foundationalism known as reliabilism. Indeed, as a form of externalism, reliabilism allows that at least some of one’s beliefs can be justified even if one is not aware of and is not immediately capable of being aware of what makes them justified.¹ Also, in the most thoroughgoing contemporary defense of coherentism that I know of, Laurence Bonjour’s,² it is required that one’s reasons be “available” to one. Bonjour’s coherentism is internalist, whereas Harman’s coherence theory is clearly externalist.

At any rate, what Harman calls the foundations theory adheres to the “Principle of Negative Undermining [PNU]: One should stop believing *P* whenever one does not associate one’s belief in *P* with an adequate justification.” The PNU can seem plausible because in philosophizing we tend to consider examples in which all the relevant reasons are explicitly spelled out. The coherence theory, more realistically, endorses the “Principle of Positive Undermining [PPU]: One should stop believing *P* whenever one positively believes one’s reasons for believing *P* are no good” (p. 39), i.e., one “relied crucially on false assumptions” (p. 43). Harman argues that since one does not keep track of the justifications of the bulk of one’s beliefs, the PNU requires giving up most of one’s beliefs. That is absurd, so the PNU must be rejected. However, is it true, as Harman assumes, that foundations theories must endorse the PNU and reject the principle of conservatism? Apparently he supposes that foundations theories must be, as one might say, Cartesian: beliefs are guilty until proven innocent. Yet this is to assume that theories of justification must build, as Descartes’s did, on a foundation of indubitable beliefs. Modern reliabilism is not so austere. It tolerates external justification, allowing that a belief can be justified merely by virtue of the reliability of the process whereby it is formed and remain justified by virtue of the reliability of the process whereby it is retained — one need not possess the justification for it.

The PPU says nothing about the conditions under which one positively believes one’s reasons to be “no good.” The validity of the PPU relative to a person would seem to depend on his ability to notice when his reasons are no good. If he is lacking in this regard, hence reckless in revising his views, he will form many unjustified beliefs and yet not violate the PPU. So Harman should require that the person be reliable in noticing when his reasons are no good. On the other hand, what if a person is overzealous in questioning his reasons? More skeptical than gullible, he will tend to seek (or recover) justifications when they are not needed. Such caution may enhance reliability but compromise efficiency, and excessive caution could result in wholesale skepticism. This outcome also seems compatible with the PPU, and it is unclear how Harman would modify the PPU so as to license more liberal belief revision.

¹ See my “A Rationale for Reliabilism,” *The Monist* 68 (April 1985): 246-63.

² *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985).

The rationale of the PPU is that one cannot coherently believe both that *P* and that one's reasons for believing *P* are no good. But what if one has no belief one way or the other about the quality of one's reasons? Harman does not consider this case, no doubt because he holds that to believe *P* is implicitly to believe one is justified in believing *P*. Indeed, for Harman there are two other implicit commitments: "when one infers [*P*], one is committed to a claim that there is no significant chance that [*P*] is false, given one's reasons for it"; and, "in ending inquiry into *P*, one is committed to the claim that further inquiry into *P* should not affect one's conclusion" (p. 52). But what do all these commitments amount to psychologically? Clearly one cannot, while continuing to believe *P*, coherently reject or even doubt any of the three propositions, but if that's all there is to being implicitly committed to them, nothing psychological is involved: we are ascribing implicit commitments to a person just to impute more coherence than there would be without them. It is not implied that if the propositions were brought to his attention, he would understand much less acknowledge them. Even if it is assumed that he would continue to believe *P* only if he did acknowledge them, it doesn't follow that they played any role in the process that led to his believing *P* in the first place. For example, maybe he came to believe *P* simply as a result of its appearing to him that *P*, when there occurred to him no reason not to believe *P*.

In my view (op. cit.) in such a case a person implicitly relies on the reliability of the process that led to his belief and on that of the process whereby reasons to the contrary occur to him when they are present. But to say that he implicitly relies on their reliability is only to say that their reliability is necessary for the belief in question to be justified; it does not imply that he has any belief to that effect but only that he has no belief to the contrary. What I have in mind here is close to something Harman himself suggests concerning snap decisions: "One tries to limit oneself to considering a single way of obtaining a single end" and one proceeds with it "unless there is something that sets off an 'alarm'" (p. 107);³ the point of "an alarm system [is] to alert one to occasions on which more reflection is needed or is likely to pay off" (p. 105). But I would argue that the absence of an alarm does not constitute the presence of a belief. That it takes an alarm to inhibit a snap decision (or judgment) and complicate one's reasoning does not mean that when none goes off one believes, even implicitly, that no condition obtains which would set off an alarm.

Harman notes that "reasoning is subject to constraints of feasibility and practicality" (p. 155). Thus a theory of reasoning must reckon with human limitations on memory (as to capacity and accessibility) and attention, and take into account that if belief were a matter of degree, too much recordkeeping would be required. Yet Harman pays insufficient attention to these considerations when he talks of such things as "reasons," "challenged beliefs," and "competing explanations." He should distinguish between what is and

³ I proposed much the same idea in "Default Reasoning: Jumping to Conclusions and Knowing When to Think Twice," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 65 (January 1984): 37-58, and used it to explain the role of implicit reasoning in the tradeoff between efficiency and reliability.

what is not available to the believer. The existence of a reason is one thing, the person's being aware of it is another. As for challenged beliefs and competing explanations, who poses the challenge or provides the competition? Often it is the person himself who challenges his beliefs and thinks up competing explanations. So the question arises of how good he is at doing these things. After all, the coherence of his view (how coherent his view actually is, not how coherent it seems to him) will depend on his ability to challenge beliefs and to think up new explanations, and on his ability to deal with these challenges and to assess these explanations.

One must be tuned to threats of incoherence without being obsessed with maintaining coherence: reliability must be tempered by efficiency. That is one reason why, as Harman maintains, the Principle of Positive Undermining is preferable to its negative counterpart. Yet I think a further principle is needed, according to which lack of noticed incoherence is a mark of actual coherence and which presupposes the ability mentioned above. Then it would not be arbitrary that some reasons get thought of and some do not. In this regard I wish Harman had at least raised certain questions: how do we detect and forestall potential incoherencies, what sorts of thoughts should and what ones should not occur to us in a given epistemic situation, and how is it that we are so constituted that relevant ones tend to occur and irrelevant ones do not? Harman might have considered how his principles might be implemented in our psychology, and here I have in mind such phenomena as assessment of coherence, detection of incoherence, the real-time cognitive process of comparing experiences with expectations, accessing stored information, and transitions of state other than those involved in reasoning. Perhaps I am asking for too much, for what Harman says about what he does consider certainly gives us plenty to think about.

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William James: His Life and Thought.~ GERALD E. MYERS. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986. Pp. xxi, 628.

Professor Gerald Myers's book is first-rate, of that there can be no doubt. It appears to me that he has read everything that James ever wrote, published and unpublished (though new letters, of course, may surface), and has an impressive grasp of the huge — and recently burgeoning — secondary literature. The text is crucial, to be sure, but the serious James scholar must pay equal attention to the one hundred and thirty-one pages of notes wherein Myers amplifies and frequently qualifies points in the text and evaluates in detail contending interpretations of James's work by commentators past and present. Unless one studies these notes carefully one cannot claim to have mastered the book. Myers's scholarly performance is not only impressive but must have been an exhaustive piece of work as well.

Myers's achievement cannot be overemphasized; his book is intellectually rewarding and stimulating. It is an interesting philosophical dialogue in which he constantly argues with James and considers what responses James would make, given his texts, and what responses he might have made, given his