

Extending the Space of Reasons:
Comments on Chapter Four of Understanding People

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1. Wilfrid Sellars employs the metaphor of the space of reasons to express a certain conception of knowledge: “in characterising an episode or state as that of knowing ... one is placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says”.¹ A growing number of philosophers employ the same metaphor to express a conception of at least some (other) mental states: in characterising a state as that of belief, or intention, one is placing it in the same logical space.² The burden of Alan Millar’s characteristically careful and thought-provoking book is to tell us what this conception amounts to, and to argue for its truth. Its central claim is that the concepts of belief and intention, and what they are concepts of, are (in a sense to be explained) normative. Chapter four – “the heart of the book”, in Millar’s view³ – is devoted to explaining, and defending this claim.

¹Wilfrid Sellars, ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind’, in H. Feigl and M. Scriven (eds.) Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), pp. 298-9.

² Here I think (of course) of Robert Brandom and John McDowell. See Robert Brandom, Making it Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), and John McDowell, Mind and World (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

³ Alan Millar, ‘Précis of Understanding People’, this journal.

In these comments, I will focus on what Millar's claim has to say about belief. I will suggest that the claim breaks down into three indistinct theses (§2), examine his argument for these, and claim that it is, at best, incomplete (§3). I will then develop a further problem for his claim (§4) and, finally, suggest that there might be a way to make sense of a conception of belief as a standing in the space of reasons that is not wanting for argument, and does not face this further problem (§5).

2. The three theses into which Millar's claim appears to divide are: a strong conceptual thesis, a weak conceptual thesis, and a constitutive thesis. Each has the status of a necessary truth, and each gives weight to the following principle.

The Implication Commitment Principle: It is necessarily the case that, for any rational subject S, and any proposition P, if S believes P, then for any proposition Q, if P implies Q, then S incurs a commitment to believing Q, if S gives a verdict on Q.⁴

According to the strong conceptual thesis, the Implication Commitment Principle is analytically true. The claim that S believes that P brings into play the concept of believing that P, and "without further ado" – that is, simply on account of the content of the claim, and "without the help of additional assumptions, other than ones that merely

⁴ Millar, Understanding People (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 109. The restriction to rational subjects is important. A rational subject is a subject in possession of capacities to reflect on her own states of mind, and Millar's claim only concerns the species of belief that such subjects can enjoy, and its concept. (There is more on the idea of a rational subject in §5.)

make explicit features of [this] content” – implies that S incurs a commitment to believing any implication of P upon which she gives a verdict.⁵

According to the weak conceptual thesis, “grasping the concept of belief commits one to accepting the [Principle]”.⁶ It is not possible for S to believe that she believes that P, but not be committed to believing that she incurs a commitment to believing any proposition P implies upon which she gives a verdict; and, it is not possible for S to believe of another rational subject that they believe that P, but not be committed to believing that this rational subject incurs the same commitment.

According to the constitutive thesis, the Principle is a “partial specification ... of what it is” to believe P; in other words, it is a partial specification of the nature of belief.⁷ It is part of what it is to believe P that S (who believes P) is committed to believing any proposition P implies upon which she gives a verdict.

What is the relation between the strong thesis and the constitutive thesis? If the Principle is an analytic truth – as the former maintains – how can it not be the case that the Principle gives a (perhaps only partial) specification of what it is to believe P? If it is analytically true that bachelors are unmarried males,⁸ it goes without saying that what it is for X to be a bachelor is (at least in part) for X to be an unmarried male. And it goes without saying not only because it is evidently true, but also because, in typical circumstances, the point of saying that a proposition specifies what it is to be something

⁵ Understanding People, p. 93.

⁶ Understanding People, p. 118.

⁷ See Understanding People, p. 118.

⁸ Why ‘if’? Well, which of the following are bachelors: a recently divorced male who has previously been married fifteen times; an unmarried male who has lived with, and been in a loving relationship with, the same partner for over sixty years; an unmarried male who is in a civil partnership with another unmarried male; an unmarried male who has never married and lives on his own; a married male who was forcibly married at the age of one-and-a-half? Is this supposed to be a matter that a concept – and it alone – can decide? See Charles Travis, ‘Aristotle’s Condition’, in P. Greenough and D. Pritchard (eds.) *Williamson on Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

is to bring out that the proposition is, at the least, necessarily true, but not necessarily analytic. This seems not to be Millar's point, because he seems to think the Principle is analytic. Perhaps he bothers to state the strong thesis and the constitutive thesis because he wants to reject the idea that his claim concerns only the concept of belief and not belief's nature. But it is not entirely clear what this suggestion amounts to. The strong thesis concerns the concept of belief; but because it purports to state an analytic truth, it cannot but concern the nature of belief as well. What kind of claim could concern the concept of X but not X's nature?

One answer is: the kind of claim enshrined in the weak thesis. The weak thesis states that being committed to accepting the Principle is a condition for grasping the concept of belief; and, on the assumption that anything one must accept in order to grasp a concept must be true, this implies the truth of the Principle. But, on the further assumption that the Principle can be true and the constitutive thesis false – an assumption that Millar seems to accept, as we will see – it does not follow that the constitutive thesis is also true. As a result, the weak thesis appears to be a claim that concerns the concept of belief, but neither makes nor implies a claim about belief's nature. In saying that his claim concerns the nature of belief as well as its concept, Millar seems to be insisting that he is committed, not only to the weak thesis, but to the constitutive thesis as well.

This tells us why Millar bothers to state the constitutive thesis and the weak thesis. But it does not tell us why he bothers to state the constitutive thesis and the strong thesis. Perhaps Millar is not committed to the strong thesis after all. If he was, why would he bother stressing that he is also committed to the constitutive thesis, as opposed simply to reminding us that he is obviously committed to it, simply on account of his

commitment to the strong thesis? This suspicion is compounded by the fact that, in these post-Quinian days, it is a little *recherché* – and so a little surprising – to find a philosopher boldly claiming to have laid his hands on an analytic truth, especially one that has been unacknowledged hitherto. Even so, Millar does seem to express a commitment to the strong thesis. In what follows, I will assess Millar’s argument for its success in establishing both the strong thesis and the constitutive thesis, where the latter is understood on the assumption that the Principle states a necessary, but not analytic, truth. As we will see, it will not in the end matter whether Millar is committed to the strong thesis or not.

Whichever thesis (or theses) Millar is trying to argue for, his argument attempts to show its (or their) superiority over an alternative position that rejects it (or them) but endorses the Principle. This argument can only get off the ground if it is possible to do what this alternative position claims. In what follows, I will consider whether it is possible, en route to suggesting that the argument seems not to succeed.

3. In the case of the constitutive thesis, the alternative position claims the following: even though the Principle is a necessary (but not analytic) truth, incurring the commitment specified in the Principle is not part of what it is to believe that P; in other words, it is not constitutive of believing – contrary to what the constitutive thesis claims. However, on the assumption that the alternative position is not simply a version of the strong thesis, and so does not maintain that the Principle is analytic, what exactly does this claim of constitution add to the claim upon which the constitutive thesis and the

alternative position agree: that, necessarily (but not analytically), if S believes that P, then S incurs the specified commitment? In other words, is there is a difference between the constitutive thesis and the Principle, where the latter is understood as stating a necessary but not an analytic truth?

It is not obvious that there is. I am going to consider two ways in which it might be thought that there is, and suggest that neither is of help.

According to some philosophers, even though it is necessarily the case that, if I was not alive, then I would not be able to wiggle my fingers, nevertheless my being able to wiggle my fingers is not constituted by my being alive, because it is not in virtue of my being alive that I have this ability, but rather in virtue of my brain and body functioning in a certain sort of way.⁹ We ought to be able to explain why this is true (if it is). And one explanation seems to be this: having a suitably functioning brain and body is necessary and sufficient for possession of the ability, but being alive is merely necessary. Applying this suggestion to the present case, we can say the following: according to the Principle, where P implies Q, and S gives a verdict on Q, S's incurring a commitment to believing Q is necessary for S's believing P; so, according to the constitutive thesis, where P implies Q, and S gives a verdict on Q, S's incurring a commitment to believing Q is also sufficient for S's believing P. But this is surely absurd. The proposition that it never rains in Southern California implies the proposition that it did not rain in Southern California on Friday 18th March 1983; and I can (of course) be committed to believing the latter without believing the former, for I might simply believe the (more modest) proposition that it did not rain in Southern California during the week beginning Monday

⁹ Ram Neta is one philosopher who argues in something close to this way. See his 'In Defense of Disjunctivism', in A. Haddock and F. Macpherson (eds.) Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

14th March 1983. Incurring a determinate commitment to believing Q cannot, then, be sufficient for believing P. To ensure that the constitutive thesis remains both a going concern, and distinct from the Principle, we need a different account of what constitution amounts to.

We can arrive at one such account by reflection on the case of dispositions and their grounds. Consider an aspirin: it has a disposition (to relieve headaches), which can be recorded in terms of a conditional (if S takes the aspirin, then S's headache is relieved), and which has a ground (the chemical structure of the aspirin) that both explains why the aspirin has this disposition, and, importantly, can be specified without employing the concepts that figure in the relevant conditional. It is not simply that the conditional holds of the aspirin; it is also that there are features of the aspirin that can be specified from outside the conditional's concepts, and which explain why the conditional holds. This allows us to draw a distinction. It is one thing for it to be necessarily so that if ... then ..., and quite another for there to be features of the thing of which this holds that explain "from outside" why this is so. In the latter case, but not in the former, the conditional is not only a necessary truth but also a (perhaps partial) specification of what it is to be the thing in question. We can now say the following: if the Principle is to be a partial specification of what it is to believe that P, there must be an explanation of why this Principle holds that appeals to features of belief that can be specified "from outside".

Millar explicitly rejects the possibility of providing an explanation of why belief is commitment-incurring that satisfies this "from outside" requirement. He notes that certain ethicists attempt to explain moral principles by appealing to its consequences for a feature that can be specified "from outside"; as when consequentialists attempt to explain

why killing is wrong by appealing to its upshot for the general good. But he thinks that attempting to do something similar in the present case – by appealing to some kind of independently specifiable value that will be attained if we conform to the Principle – is “odd”, and “leads to a dead-end”.¹⁰ So, it looks as if, by Millar’s own lights, we cannot make sense of a distinction between the constitutive thesis and the Principle, if we take the aspirin case as our model.

But perhaps we can still make sense of the distinction. The constitutive thesis purports to specify part of the nature of belief, and says that it part of this nature that, if S believes that P, then S incurs the commitment specified in the Principle. In so doing, it seems to contrast with a different thesis, according to which it is not part of the nature of belief, but part of the nature of rationality that, if S believes that P, then S incurs the specified commitment. (Perhaps the nature of rationality consists of the totality of relevant normative principles, of which the Principle is one.) If this is right, then there is a difference between the constitutive thesis and the Principle, because the thesis does, and the Principle by itself does not, take a stand on whether the Principle specifies (part of) the nature of belief, or (part of) the nature of something else (for instance, rationality). It is, of course, possible for the Principle to specify the nature of both rationality and belief. But, whether or not it does, it looks as if an alternative to the constitutive thesis – which accepts the Principle but denies the thesis – can be made out.

An alternative to the strong conceptual thesis is easy to see: the Principle is not an analytic truth. The claim that S believes that P implies that S incurs a commitment to believing any implication of P upon which she gives a verdict only if this claim is conjoined with the Principle. The Principle is necessarily true; but it does not specify the

¹⁰ Understanding People, p. 117.

nature of the concept of belief. It is not even part of the nature of this concept that, if S believes that P, then S incurs the specified commitment.

So, does Millar's argument establish the strong thesis, or the constitutive thesis, or both?

If we were to use Millar's argument in support of the strong thesis, it would run as follows. Short of an explanation of why the Principle holds, it is mystery why it does so; but it is not a mystery why it does so; so, there must be an explanation; and the strong thesis provides the only such explanation: the Principle holds because it is part of the nature of the concept of belief that it holds; therefore, the strong thesis is true.

The problem with this argument is that, even if it is valid, one of its premises is surely false. If the strong thesis suffices to explain why the Principle holds, it seems the constitutive thesis can do the same: the Principle is true because it is part of the nature of belief that it is true. If Millar's explanatory demand can be met by the strong thesis, it looks as if there is no need for it to be met by the strong thesis, for the constitutive thesis will do just as well.

To ensure that his argument establishes all three theses, Millar needs to build a bridge from the constitutive thesis to the others. He might be able to move from the constitutive to the weak thesis if he could make good on his claim that there is no more to the nature of belief than is "specified by ... the concept" of belief P.¹¹ I am not entirely sure what it means for the nature of something to be "specified" by a concept, but it is not implausible to suppose it means at least the following: if S grasps the concept of X, then she believes all the truths there are to believe about the nature of X. If this is right, then

¹¹ Understanding People, p. 102.

belief in the constitutive thesis is a condition for grasping the concept of belief, and something very close to – in fact stronger than – the weak thesis would be ensured.

However, it is not obvious that we can move from this new version of the weak thesis to the strong thesis. To ensure that we can, Millar would need to free from criticism the thought that any belief required for the grasp of a concept must have an analytic truth as its content. And that thought is not evidently true. Donald Davidson is one philosopher who claims that we can reject the very idea of an analytic truth,¹² but nevertheless maintain that possessing appropriate beliefs is a condition for grasping (at least some) concepts. For Davidson, it is considerations of overall interpretative charity that determine which beliefs are appropriate, and not analyticity. If Davidson is right, then the beliefs required for grasping concepts need not have any analytic truths as their contents.

But, even if Millar could free the thought from criticism, trying to do so would surely be a forlorn project, for it seems we already have in hand an explanation of why the Principle holds that does not appeal to the constitutive thesis: namely, that it holds because it is part of the nature of rationality that it does so.

The upshot, then, is that it seems there is another explanation of why the Principle holds, which relies on neither the constitutive, weak, nor strong, thesis. And if that is so then it looks as if, even if Millar can plug the lacuna in his argument that I have identified, he has not given us reason to prefer any of the theses over a position that denies them, and accounts for the truth of the Principle in the way I have described.

¹² See Donald Davidson, 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' (1974), in his Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

4. I now want to develop a problem for the Implication Commitment Principle itself, by examining Millar claim that “it is not possible for [us] to adopt a contemplative stance towards”¹³ our own current beliefs.

Taking a contemplative stance towards one of our beliefs is a matter of registering that we have the belief, “without taking that fact to have any normative import”¹⁴ for us, where taking the fact to have such import is a matter of thinking that the fact ensures we incur the commitment specified in the Principle. It is not obvious that we cannot take this stance towards our beliefs.

Gareth Evans is famous for discerning a certain transparency in second-order belief: our justification for believing that we believe that P (or, do not believe that P) is equivalent to our justification for believing P. We consider the reasons whether or not P and either conclude that P is the case, and we believe P, or conclude that P is not the case, and we do not believe P. We might think that all second-order beliefs are transparent in this way. But Richard Moran, from whom Millar takes the idea of a contemplative stance, writes that if “I have some reason to believe that some attitude of mine is not “up to me”... then I cannot take the question regarding my attitude to be transparent to a corresponding question regarding what it is directed upon.”¹⁵ And it seems that Moran is right about this.

I might be a committed believer in socio-biology and, as a result, believe that, as a member of the species homo sapiens, I have various psychological tendencies that flow from my evolutionarily determined nature. One of these is a tendency to believe racially

¹³ Understanding People, p. 124.

¹⁴ Understanding People, p. 111.

¹⁵ Richard Moran, Authority and Estrangement (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 67.

discriminatory thoughts. Of course, when I reflect on whether or not these thoughts are true, I see no reason to believe they are. Nevertheless, I see plenty of reason to believe that I believe they are, and as a result, I form this second-order belief. In such a case, transparency fails.

If this socio-biological story is correct, my first-order belief derives, not from reflection on whether or not its content is so, but from something over which it seems I have no control: namely, my biological nature. It is a belief I am simply landed with, and not one I formed on the basis of reasons. It is also one I am unable to give up. Or, rather, the only way I could give it up is by altering my biological nature. Perhaps it is possible for me to do that. But, even if it is, it surely cannot be rationally required that I abandon the belief. Consider an analogy. It cannot be rationally required that NN conform to basic social norms if NN no longer possess the ability to do so because she suffers from Alzheimer's Disease, even though it may be possible to find a cure for this disease (one day), and thereby restore her ability. 'Ought' implies 'can', at least in this case, for even though there may be a sense in which even an Alzheimer's sufferer can conform to such basic norms, they surely cannot do so in the sense that matters to the present 'ought'. The same goes for the subject of the socio-biological story: it cannot be the case that they are rationally required to abandon the belief.¹⁶ The problem is that this is precisely what the Principle requires.

¹⁶ It might be objected that the Alzheimer's disease sufferer is not relevant here, because she is not in any sense a rational subject. I think this is disputable, if we employ the conception of a rational subject that I sketch in §5 of this paper (which Millar seems to endorse). But the objection is not relevant in any case, for the point of the analogy is to remind us of a sense of 'ability' on which a sufferer who lacks a certain ability is on that account not subject to a certain 'ought', and so long as the very same sense applies to rational subjects' inability to reject certain beliefs on account of their biological nature, it does not matter whether the Alzheimer's sufferer is a rational subject or not.

If I believe that P, and P implies Q, I am committed to believing Q, if I give a verdict upon Q; and – as Millar makes clear – one way of discharging this commitment is to stop believing P. That is what I am rationally required to do if P implies Q, and I believe P, but give a negative verdict on Q. So, if I were to believe the racially discriminatory thoughts, but to give a negative verdict on whether or not their consequences are so, then – by the Principle – I would be rationally required to abandon my belief in the thoughts. But, in the relevant sense of ‘cannot’, this is something I cannot do. And, for this reason, it cannot be rationally required that I do so. In such a case, taking a contemplative stance towards my beliefs is something I can do, and ought to do.

If this is right, then it seems that Millar has a choice. He could restrict the Principle so that it applies only to beliefs that are “up to us”; in other words, to beliefs that (in the relevant sense) we can reject. Or, he could deny that the story I have just told, and others like it, could possibly be true, and claim that all beliefs are, necessarily, “up to us” in this sense.

But, if beliefs are located in a causal nexus, how can there be an obstacle in principle to their being so located as to place them outside our control? Millar does not want to deny that beliefs have causal location; indeed, he wants to insist that a conception of belief as a standing in the space of reasons is compatible with them having such location. And yet, if he were to say that all beliefs are necessarily “up to us”, he has to claim that there is a certain kind of causal location that beliefs cannot have.

I do not know how Millar will respond to this problem. But, however he does, it seems to be a problem that he has to face.

5. In these comments, I have suggested that Millar does not have a compelling argument for his theses. I have also presented a problem for the Principle to which the theses adhere. Does this mean that we should reject a conception of belief as a standing in the space of reasons? I want to end by suggesting: perhaps not. Perhaps there is a way of understanding that conception on which it is undeniable, and avoids these objections.

Millar's claim confines itself to the beliefs of rational subjects. There are various ways of understanding the idea of a rational subject, but one way is surely as that of subjects whose doings – intentional bodily actions, for instance, and mental acts such as thinking and intending – are, perhaps not always, but certainly sometimes, explicable by appeal to considerations that display them as things that subjects rationally ought to go in for, in the relevant circumstances.¹⁷ In such cases, the considerations count as both reasons for subjects to do what they do, and reasons why they do so. And these 'reasons for' are, in many if not all cases, things that the subject believes. So, the beliefs of rational subjects must be capable of providing reasons for their doings.¹⁸ That they are so capable is a truth that holds necessarily of beliefs in this class.

This description of rational subjects offers one way of unfolding the idea that belief is a standing in the space of reasons. It is also a description that anyone who understands this paper should recognise, for it is surely a description of us. That is

¹⁷ See John McDowell, 'Functionalism and Anomalous Monism' (1986), in his Mind, Value, and Reality (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹⁸ They may only be able to do so when they act in tandem with other states of mind (such as desires). But there is no need for me to take a stand on this issue here.

something I cannot see how we can hope to deny. And, if we cannot, then we have reason to accept a version of the conception that Millar wishes to defend.¹⁹

¹⁹ I would like to thank Jane Calvert and Duncan Pritchard, for their help and encouragement.