Is There a Right to be Wrong?

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1. An Apparent Conflict?

I would like to begin with some quotations that set the scene for my discussion:

(1) 'Truth is the highest thing that man may keep.'[1]
(2) 'Truth is treasure, the best tried on earth.'[2]
(3) 'Truth is the most pleasant of sounds.'[3]
(4) 'Veracity is the heart of morality.'[4]
(5) 'No one who lives in error is free.'[5]
(6) 'A man protesting against error is on the way towards uniting himself with all men that believe in truth.'[6]
(7) 'Driven from every corner of the earth, freedom of thought and the right of private judgment in matters of conscience direct their course to this happy country as their last asylum.'[7]
(8) 'Love truth, but pardon error.'[8]
(9) 'The greatest right in the world is the right to be wrong.'[9]

There is, I submit, a certain tension between the first six and the last three quotations. On the one hand, it is thought that truth is itself a good, more precisely a good thing *to possess*. Truth is compared to a treasure, a precious thing whose value rises above everything else. It is even thought to be at the heart of morality itself. The implication is that it is something worth striving for, maybe not something that can or should be acquired at all costs, but certainly something we should pursue throughout our lives, in order for our lives to be fulfilled.

[1] Chaucer, 'The Frankeleyn's Tale', l.751; quoted in *Stevenson's Book of Quotations*, 9th edn, 1958, p. 2048.
[2] William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, pt. ii; Stevenson, p. 2049.
[3] Plato, in Diogenes Laertius, *Plato*, sec. 40; Stevenson, p. 2049.
[4] T. H. Huxley, *Universities Actual and Ideal*; Stevenson, p. 2049.
[5] Epictetus, *Discourses*, ii.1.24; Stevenson, p. 575.
[6] Thomas Carlyle, *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, lect. 4; Stevenson, p. 577.
[7] Samuel Adams, speech, Philadelphia, 1776; quoted in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, 16th edn, 1992, p. 325.
[8] Voltaire, *Discours sur l'homme*, no. 3; Stevenson, p. 578.
[9] Harry Weinberger, 'The First Casualties in War', *New York Evening Post*, 10.4.1917; Stevenson, p. 1728.

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On the other hand, it is thought that there is goodness in falsehood, or what I shall call *error*. There are two ways in which this is commonly thought to be the case. First—and this is what is implied by the last three quotations—there is a *right to make mistakes*, a right to be wrong. No one who thinks that there is a right to make mistakes is likely to go as far as to think that it is better to be in possession of error rather than truth. Hence we should 'pardon' error, as Voltaire says. But his unmistakable implication is that we should pardon error as we pardon, say, the emission of wind, rather than as we pardon theft. Just as no one would want to ban the emission of wind, given its deleterious consequences for the nation's health, so one should not want to ban error, given the harmful effect this would have on people's liberty and indeed on the pursuit of truth itself, as John Stuart Mill argued so forcefully in *On Liberty*.

Secondly—and this is not evident in the last three quotations—the right to make mistakes is often, especially in modern society, seen as a positive good, something to be *encouraged*. The thought here is that the right to make mistakes is central to a person's *self-determination*, to his development as an individual personality. 'It's my life and I've got to make my own mistakes in my own way!' is the battle cry of, if not real adolescents and adolescent-minded adults, at least television types held up for our emulation on endless, sub-standard soap operas. Living your life *authentically*, as the existentialists would have us believe, *requires* that we go forth into the world in our faltering way, falling, picking ourselves up, falling again, all the while *learning* and developing our individual personalities by the accretion of sincerely held and pursued commitments.

Such is the rosy picture of personal self-development painted for us in innumerable and well-appointed counselling rooms throughout the West. Yet the suspicion that the apparent tension between the good of truth and the right to error is also a real one does not go away. On the first view of how error contains goodness, the defender of the right to error does not claim that falsehood as such is good, but insists that the right to believe it is conceptually bound to that which *is* intrinsically good, namely freedom of thought. In the wider picture of what is good for man, he says, the right to pursue what is itself undesirable is an inextricable part of what is itself desirable, that is the freedom to exercise one's mind however one wishes. The tension here is in the thought that morality can prescribe something to be good for a person, in this case the acquisition of truth, while at the same time prescribing as good something, namely freedom of belief, which by its very nature, and given our finite and fallible intellects, is bound to take us *away* from truth. To take an analogy, consider the fact that it is a good thing to be healthy.

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Should we say that people have, as well as the obligation to look after their health, the right to eat whatever they want in whatever quantities they want? You might immediately say 'Of course they do', but here I think you would be confusing the right to eat unhealthily with the right not to be *forced* to eat healthily. I will return to this distinction later, but note here simply that if it is a proper one, the analogy with health is useful. If it is strange to think that morality obliges you to look after your health while giving you the inherent right not to in the name of the alleged freedom to treat your body however you like, the same should be said for truth and the alleged freedom to *think* whatever you like.

On the second view of how there is goodness in error, the tension is even more apparent. The thought proposed by the defender of the right to error is that there is something inherently good, by which he means life-affirming, personality-developing, education-enhancing (pick your favourite New Age buzzword) in the making of mistakes. But how can this be so if it is also good to acquire truth? If it is good to acquire truth it must be good to eliminate error, since the latter is necessary for the former. But if it is good to eliminate error it cannot also be good to fall into it, any more than it can be good to be healthy but also good to be unhealthy. This tension, if it is real, means either that acquiring truth is not good after all, or what is more likely, that the idea of there being something inherently good in making mistakes is an illusion.

2. The Good of Truth

To see whether the right to be wrong really can co-exist with the goodness of truth, we need to understand how truth fits into the framework of morality. It is, according to the sort of theory I defend,[10] one of a finite set of *basic human goods* that go to make up *the good for man*, in Aristotelian terms *happiness* (which is a far cry from the 'happiness' of the utilitarians). They are called 'basic' because they are not reducible to other goods or to each other, whereas every other good can be derived from them. This finite set of goods can plausibly be said to contain the following: life; work and play (considered as different aspects of the same good); friend-

[10] *Moral Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). See also J. Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), esp. ch. III and T. Chappell, *Understanding Human Goods* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), esp. pp. 39–40. My account overlaps substantially with theirs, but there are important differences; among other things, our lists of basic human goods are not identical.

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ship; aesthetic experience; and religion (where religion is meant to include external practice and not to be equivalent to the having of certain private feelings or emotions). I mention these goods only to put them to one side, since the one on which we need to concentrate, and which is also on the list, is truth. More accurately, it is not so much truth *itself* that is a basic good for man (although truth and goodness are really the same thing, to wit *reality*, considered under different aspects), but the *pursuit, acquisition* and *possession* of truth.

Human beings are endowed with a certain constitution or nature. It is of course fashionable in the present scientistic climate to think that the idea of a fixed human nature is an archaic relic of a bygone age, when life and its development was far more mysterious than it is now, when the human mind, rather brain, was so much less understood, when philosophers were without the benefit of the theory of evolution to explain how human beings have come to be what they are. According to the modern view, you can speak of human nature if you like, but what you are really talking about is whatever stage in human evolution mankind happens to have reached at the present time. According to the evolutionary view, human nature can never be fixed, or else it may (in the occult and obscure sense popularized by Teilhard de Chardin) be evolving towards some fixed point in the future—but in either case, it is not fixed yet.

This sort of view of human nature is open to numerous criticisms,[11] and I do not intend to explore these here. What is directly relevant to the present discussion is the fact that human beings, as creatures endowed with reason (in a way not shared by any other kind of animal)[12] are built for the pursuit, acquisition and possession of truth. The very function of reason is to gain the truth, whether the truth sought be anything from the practical one of how to survive the next winter to the purely theoretical and speculative one of whether every even number is the sum of two primes. Everywhere and at all times human beings have wondered about the way the world is. Curiosity issues in study, research, exploration, experimentation and all of the activities distinctive of the truth-seeker. Yet it is not mere *truths* we seek, but *truth*. I doubt if any of us, on serious reflection, would be happy at the thought that all we needed to do was to hit the Return key of some undreamed-of supercomputer in order to get us the answer to any conceivable question. What we want is *knowledge* and *understanding*, even *wis-*

[11] For an excellent recent critique, see A. O'Hear, *Beyond Evolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

[12] See the author's *Applied Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), ch. 3.

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dom (unfashionable though that term now is in philosophical circles). We want either to engage ourselves in the very activity of *seeking* after truth or at least to have truth *explained* to us in a way that is satisfying and that enables the incorporation of what we *learn* into our worldview.

From these general considerations we can see that truth is a basic good for human beings. This is *not* to say that it is always good for a person to know the truth about some particular thing on some particular occasion. (I will return to this later.) On the other hand, it does mean that a direct attack on truth, such as a deliberate lie, is wrong, just as any deliberate attack on any human good is wrong.

3. Truth, Rights and Duties

Truth is a human good because human beings are endowed with reason and so are built for the pursuit of truth. In other words, the pursuit of truth *fulfils* human nature. So does being healthy, since health is also a good, though not basic since it is derived from the good of life itself. It is good for us to be healthy and this is simply a datum of morality, a moral fact about us human beings as animals (albeit rational ones). Is it conceivable, then, that health should be a good and yet that there should be no *right* to be healthy? This looks inconsistent—how can it be good for a person to do something and yet there be no right for him to do it? Morality would, it is evident, be an inconsistent, maybe even unintelligible system of concepts and principles if there were things that were *good* for people and yet that they had no right to do. Rights can be seen, then, as a kind of *protection* conferred by morality on people in their pursuit of the good. They *bind* others not to interfere with that pursuit.[13]

In the case of truth or health, people have a strict obligation to pursue them. But the way in which we pursue goods is quite broad. They can be pursued in a relatively active or visible sense, or in a more passive and less visible sense. Now morality does not require us to be actively pursuing every good all of the time: that would be to ask too much—maybe even the logically impossible.[14] But morality does at least require us to pursue every good all of the time in the minimal sense of not directly attacking them. Now what constitutes a direct attack on a good is not something I want to explore here. Obvious examples of direct attacks on goods are such things

[13] For lengthier examination of these matters, see *Moral Theory*, ch. 2.

[14] This depends on whether one can even conceive of a world in which human beings actively pursued every good simultaneously by doing one kind of thing. Conditions in our world do not seem to allow it.

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as murder, theft and lying. These and other attacks are very easy to avoid carrying out—you and I are, one hopes, avoiding them right now. So you might have thought it ridiculous that I could be pursuing any goods when, say, I sit in my chair and stare out the window. This would be an understandable response to the ordinary use of the term 'pursue'. On the theory I defend, however, 'pursue' has a technical sense according to which a human being can be said to pursue a certain good at a certain time even when he is not doing anything of an especially active, visible, or socially or culturally significant character to *promote* that good at that time. So, for instance, when I sit in my chair staring out the window I am pursuing at least three basic goods in an active sense: (i) I am pursuing the good of life, because I am alive, I know I am alive, and am not consciously doing anything to harm my life; (ii) I am pursuing the good of knowledge, because even though I am not studying, or doing exams, or carrying out experiments, or reading the newspaper, or having a conversation, and so on, I am taking in information about the world around me and am processing it and incorporating it into my worldview. I *know* I am doing this, or at least am *disposed* to become aware of it if prompted; (iii) I am also probably pursuing the good of aesthetic experience, because I am either positively beholding something pleasing to the eye, or at the very least—one hopes—not deliberately inflicting upon myself something ugly. Again, the conditions for pursuing aesthetic experience in an active sense are not stringent: I do not have to be painting, or walking around an art gallery, or frolicking in the woods, or smelling the daffodils. All that is necessary is that, in a minimal sense, I be engaged upon experiencing something not inherently displeasing to the eye. But I am, as I sit and stare out the window, pursuing every good in the more minimal sense of not consciously doing anything to undermine them in my case or that of others. For instance, in the case of aesthetic experience, all I need minimally to do in order to be said to be pursuing it as a good is not to be living a life dedicated to the creation or promotion of ugliness. And that I am avoiding as I stare out my window. Of course a *ceteris paribus* clause has to be added, for I might be a building magnate looking out of my window at the latest tower block monstrosity I have created. Or I might be looking out of my window when I should be sitting an exam, which would mean I was undermining the good of truth, among others.

There is, then, a conceptual connection between the pursuit of a good and the avoidance of undermining it. Morality would demand too much of us if it asked that we pursue the good in an active, let alone visibly substantial, way all of the time. It is for this reason that we can see why even people in a highly diminished state of flour-

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ishing, such as the very sick, the severely handicapped, and even the comatose, pursue goods without necessarily doing so actively or in a socially significant way. The comatose person, for instance, is still alive, and hence still pursuing the good of life, even if he does not do so in the active way in which healthy and alert people pursue life, even if he does not do so *consciously*. Life is still a good for him, he still has an *interest* in living,[15] even if he pursues that good in a way that is highly diminished relative to those who are not in a coma.

Health too, as was said above, is a good that it is obligatory to pursue. We have a duty not only to refrain from deliberately attacking life, whether our own or other people's,[16] but also to preserve and promote health. It is good to be healthy because health contributes directly to the maintenance of life itself. So again, unless morality is thought to be incoherent—something I assume not to be the case—there must be a *right* to be healthy, in other words morality must *allow* us to pursue the good of health *because* it is a good. Were this not the case morality would, to use a metaphor, be taking away with one hand what it gives with the other. There are, however, different ways of pursuing health. They include such basic ones as good diet, exercise, adequate rest, and so on. But there is a wide range of optionality in the way these means are employed. In the case of exercise, for example, some people jog, some swim, some enjoy a brisk walk, and so on. Morality does not require everyone to jog, or everyone to take up cycling. And yet everyone has the *right* to jog, and the *right* to cycle, because these are means of promoting the good of health.

It appears, then, that there is a distinction between what we might call *duty*-rights, which is to say those rights morality confers on people as protection in their pursuing goods that are *obligatory*, and *option*-rights, or those that are conferred as protection in their pursuing goods that are *optional*. We have a duty to protect our lives and our health, and hence have a right to do so. (This is why we have a right of self-defence.) We have a choice, however, in the way we go about doing this, and we also have a right to exercise that choice. Somewhat loosely, we can say that duty-rights protect the achievement of ends that are good in themselves and option-rights protect

[15] For the same ideas expressed in terms of interests, see Helen Watt, *Life and Death in Health Care Ethics* (London: Routledge, 2000).

[16] Subject to important qualifications which cannot be discussed here, namely cases of war and capital punishment, and also the proviso that what is not permitted is the *intentional* undermining of life. Acts of self-defence, altruistic acts which expose one to physical risk, and the permissibility of not trying to preserve life at all costs, are also important qualifications to the general principle. (See *Moral Theory*, ch. 4, and *Applied Ethics*, chs. 2, 4 and 5.)

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ends that are themselves also *means* to the achievement of ends that are good in themselves. Riding a bicycle is an objective you can seek to realize, but it is also a means to the achievement of health, which is good in itself. The reason it is only in a loose sense that one can say that duty-rights protect intrinsic ends and option-rights protect instrumental ends is apparent in the case of health. I said above that health was a means to the maintenance of life. But then shouldn't the right to be healthy be an option-right, because the good it protects is instrumental? It should not, because although health is instrumental in this way, it is not an option among a range of means for maintaining life, in the way that jogging and cycling are two among many means for maintaining health. If you want to live, you *have* to be healthy, you don't have a choice. This does not mean you have to be in perfect health, or that a person cannot live to a ripe old age while in poor health most of the time. The person who lives while in poor health does do *despite* poor health, not because of it. To the extent that a person in poor health lives a long life, it will be because of other factors allied to *good* health, such as healthy genes, a healthy diet, plenty of exercise, and so on. What we need to note is: (i) that we are dealing with *generic* truths about human beings—humans need to be healthy in order to stay alive, even if this or that particular person, for whatever reason, can stay alive while in poor health; (ii) that what constitutes health, or the realization of any other good, has to be construed broadly, inasmuch as we need to be sensitive to the diverse ways in which goods can be realized.

To take another example, I said earlier that friendship is a basic good. But this does not mean everyone has to have at least one bosom buddy in whom they regularly confide. The good of friendship is the good that man, as a *social* animal, needs to pursue. In this broader sense friendship can be achieved by having a soul mate, or a bosom buddy, or a number of less close but still affectionate relationships, or by living in a warm and loving family, or by getting involved in numerous social activities, or by living in a community governed by a set of rules, such as a monastery, and so on. Seen in this way, it becomes clear that even the most reclusive hermit does not shun all friendship.[17] And even if we could conceive of a person who went through life with nothing approximating to social contact of a more than instrumental kind, it would not be *because* of this that the hermit (better, recluse) got through life, but *despite* it, and in virtue of being obliged to cultivate certain characteristics in order to cope with the absence of intimate social contact.

[17] The lives of the early Christian hermits show that while keeping to themselves most of the time, they still enjoyed various kinds of social relationships.

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Given these considerations we can see that health, although strictly an instrumental good, is a necessary instrument for the maintenance of life. Hence the right to pursue it can properly be considered a duty-right just like the right to life, though life is an end in itself whereas health is not. And it is because a right is a duty-right rather than an option-right that there is no right to its opposite.[18] Returning, then, to the right to jog, we can see that its existence does not mean that you do not also have the right *not* to jog. It is because of the optionality involved in the pursuit of the instrumental good of exercise that you have the right to jog or not to jog, to swim or not to swim, on the condition that you do *something* to maintain your health, which for the vast majority of us requires some form of more or less strenuous physical activity. (Again, there might be lone individuals who do not need a moment's exercise in order to be healthy, but that will be because they have other health-promoting attributes that compensate for the lack of exercise. As a generic truth, however, exercise is a good.) The same goes for goods derivative from the basic good of friendship. It is optional whether you realize friendship in the possession of a bosom buddy, or in the living of a warm and supportive family life, or in devoting oneself to a wider communal life, or in the possession of a supportive network of more or less close acquaintances, or all of these together. (Indeed they manifestly overlap—your father can also be your best friend!) *How* you realize friendship is up to you, though there are obvious restrictions that have to be observed, and what they are depends on an analysis of friendship itself.[19]

When it comes to the basic goods themselves, however, and the duty-rights protecting them (as well as the derivative goods such as health itself that are essential means to the realizing of the basic goods), there is no optionality. To live well you *have* to have friendship, you *have* to experience beauty, you *have* to work and play—and you *have* to pursue truth. In the case of an option-right, choosing to exercise another option-right incompatible with it does not constitute an attack on the first right. Consider the various means of achieving friendship mentioned above. One way of having friendship is by marrying. Everyone has the right to marry. But everyone also has the right *not* to marry. Now a person, say Charles, might choose instead of marriage a life of intense community activity that is beneficial to society in various ways and also provides much in the way of friendship and social support for him. Such a lifestyle might

[18] Strictly, its contradictory.

[19] For which there is no better place to start than Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, books VIII and IX.

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be incompatible with Charles's getting married because of the demands of time and effort it places on him. But he cannot be said to be *attacking* or *undermining* the good of marriage by choosing a lifestyle incompatible with it if that lifestyle provides other forms of genuine friendship.

Contrast this with the good of truth, which we have both a right and a duty to pursue. If a person, say Emma, chooses to exercise her right to believe a true proposition *p*, she cannot *also* have the right to believe *not-p* (at the same time), because then she would have the right to believe *p and not-p*, which is logically impossible. If Charles had a *duty* to marry he could not also have the right *not* to marry, because then he would have the right to marry and not to marry (at the same time), which is also logically impossible. Because marriage and non-marriage are both optional for him, his right to marry and his right not to marry imply a right to marry or not marry. But a duty to do either one would issue in a right to do incompatible things, which he cannot. We can see, then, that in the case of the right to believe truth—since it is belief I am interested in here, let us restrict the discussion now to this aspect only of the pursuit of truth—there cannot be a simultaneous right to believe falsehood, given that believing the truth is a duty.

An objection immediately suggests itself. 'You are saying there is a duty to believe the truth. But what about all those truths a person never gets around to believing, say because he's not interested in the subject matter they are about, or because he is not intellectually capable of arriving at a belief concerning them, or because, like all of us, he has a finite lifespan and there are an infinite number of truths to believe? Are you saying that we are all acting immorally because there are truths out there we do not ever get around to believing?' The simple answer is, of course, that I am not saying we are all acting wrongly by not believing all the truths there are to believe—that would be absurd. The objection confuses optionality and duty. Again, while there is a duty to believe the truth, you have a choice about *which* truths to believe. Now you do not have unlimited freedom in this regard any more than in the case of health. In the latter case, whilst you might ordinarily be free to take up jogging, there may be other moral considerations that stand in the way, for example that jogging takes up so much time you neglect your job. Or it may be that given your occupation and other commitments the only sort of exercise you can take is a brisk twenty-minute walk; then you would be obliged to make this your regular form of exercise. The same goes for truth: you do not fulfil your obligation to believe it by believing any old truths, because there are some things on which, I claim, you are *obliged* to have an opinion

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on—but this is a subject for another time. Nevertheless, there are clearly some subjects on which you are *not* obliged to have beliefs about. For instance, I do not know how many moons Pluto has, nor even whether it has any at all, nor for that matter whether anyone knows. My circumstances do not oblige me to form a belief one way or the other (I am not an astronomer, I am not writing a book about Pluto, etc.). So even if it happens to be the case that Pluto has three moons, I am not obliged to believe that particular proposition. If, however, the question of Pluto's moons does come within the ambit of my proper concern, I *am* under a duty to form a belief, and the only belief I am duty-bound to form is a true one.

Which leads to another objection. Suppose there is some subject that is within the sphere of a person's proper concern. Consider Peter, who is a university student. He might not be obliged to have a belief about how many moons Pluto has, but he ought to have a belief about whether he has any lectures tomorrow. Am I not claiming that the only belief Peter is duty-bound to form concerning this question is a true one? But, the objection goes, suppose the truth is that Peter does not have a lecture tomorrow, whereas the evidence in his possession suggests that he has: a lecture is listed in his diary and his friends in the class said they would see him tomorrow at the lecture. It turns out that the lecturer has an urgent meeting tomorrow at the time of the lecture and put up a cancellation notice but too late for anyone to see it that day. So the truth is that there is no lecture, but it looks as though Peter has every right to believe that there is. So isn't this a case where a person has the right to believe a falsehood?

The answer is that it is not, and the reason is well illustrated by analogy with theft. Suppose Patricia takes Rowena's bag. If she knows the bag is not hers, she is guilty of theft. But what if she has good reason to think the bag is hers? Maybe it looks like hers, she did not see Rowena enter the room carrying a bag, and Patricia thought she had brought her own bag into the room whereas in fact she had left it in the car. Now, how should we assess Patricia's moral situation? Should we say that Patricia had the *right* to take Rowena's bag? Of course not! She had *no* right to take the bag—it wasn't hers to take. However, this does *not* necessarily mean Patricia has done anything *wrong*. If she really did have good reason to think the bag was hers, she is not to *blame* for taking it. The same goes for all sorts of everyday moral problems: a person may not have the right to do something and yet still be free from blame for doing it. To put the situation in traditional Aristotelian terminology, Patricia has still committed theft, only it is *material*, not *formal* theft: the requisite intent was not there.

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As for the taking of property belonging to others, so for false belief. If Peter has good reason for thinking there is a lecture tomorrow, whereas the truth is that there isn't, he is free from blame for having this false belief, but he still has no right to it. The objection, then, fails to distinguish between someone's doing what they have no right to do and the blameworthiness of their doing so. It is because of the failure to make this distinction that we tend to slip easily from saying that someone has good reason for believing *p* to saying that they therefore have a *right* to believe *p*. Strictly, you only have a right to believe *p* if *p* is true, but because of the evidence available to you it may be the case that although *p* is false and you therefore have no right to believe it, you are still *justified* in believing it and so not to be blamed when you eventually learn that *p* is in fact false. It may be that this alone does not explain our commonly speaking of the right to believe whatever we are justified in believing whether or not it is in fact true. It may be that we use this locution because what *most* of us believe *most* of the time *is* in fact true. I am not sure how one would go about verifying this. I am happy to assume it to be the case, while demurring from any thought that most of us believe, most of the time, the truth about things that are very important; about that I would need far more convincing.

It is worth remarking that things are, of course, much more complicated than I have suggested when it comes to blameworthiness of belief. An important point to note is that although the theft case mentioned above brought in the formal/material distinction, that distinction is not the same as the one between blamelessness and blameworthiness. Although every case of formal theft is blameworthy, not every blameworthy taking of another's property is formal theft. Patricia might not have intended to take Rowena's bag, but she may have done so *negligently* by ignoring flagrant evidence that it was not hers, say that Rowena was clutching it tightly only minutes before. Although the evidence she cites for her rightfully taking the bag may have suggested it was hers, the fact is that she was negligent in her weighing of the evidence.

The same goes for Peter's belief that there is a lecture tomorrow. Whether he is to be blamed for his belief depends on how he assessed the evidence. If the lecturer had actually mentioned the cancellation of tomorrow's class, but Peter happened to doze his way through the announcement, he would have been culpable in the formation of his belief. But if he had diligently weighed all the evidence available to him and come to the reasonable conclusion that there was a lecture, he would have been blameless. It need hardly be pointed out that we rarely speak in terms of blame in belief formation, but rather in terms of justification. Usually we say that a per-

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son's possession of good reasons for having a belief that *p* amounts to justification in believing *p*, and conversely. Even then, however, one can distinguish between subjective and objective justification, and say that if Peter had dozed through the announcement of the lecture's cancellation but possessed evidence which considered on its own supported the belief that there was a lecture tomorrow, he would have been subjectively justified in his belief but not objectively justified given his culpability in acquiring and assessing the evidence. The main point for the purposes of my argument, however, is unaffected. It does not follow from a person's blamelessness in the formation of a belief that *p* that they have a strict right to believe *p* where *p* is false, even though we habitually speak of the person's having just such a right.

Earlier, I denied that it is always good for a person to know the truth about some particular thing on some particular occasion. An objector to the position being defended here might seize on this point: 'Sometimes it is not good for a person to know some particular truth in certain circumstances, say the actual severity of a serious illness from which he is suffering. Indeed it might be positively good for him *not* to know it, since otherwise he would become demoralized and not fight the illness with the necessary vigour and optimism. In his state of ignorance, thinking erroneously that he has a good chance of recovery, he will be in a better frame of mind to fight the disease and so *improve* his chance of recovery. So doesn't he have a right to believe something false about himself?' But it is hard to see how the conclusion follows. If it is good for him not to know the severity of the illness, then he has a right not to know. One can imagine, for instance, a doctor zealously on the verge of pouring out to his patient all the facts, and the patient's blocking his ears and saying 'No! I don't want to know'. Certainly the patient is within his rights to have the truth concealed from him, and others correspondingly possess the right to conceal it. But it does not follow that they are permitted to *lie*, or that the patient has the right to be lied to. Nor then does he have the right to believe an actual falsehood about the state of his disease, from which the third-party permission to lie would follow. As an attack upon truth, lying to the patient in order to keep his morale up would be a case of sheer consequentialist reasoning as bad as taking his money without his knowledge in order to buy him some medicine he would not buy for himself. Again, the patient may be blameless in believing something false about the state of his health, for instance if he has been given wrong information, but he still does not have a strict right to believe that he is healthy when he is not, or that his illness is not as severe as it really is. On the contrary, facing up to the truth about one's

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health requires the virtue of courage; believing error about it can only sow the seeds of cowardly evasion.

4. Freedom, Force and the Right to Error

Truth is a good that we, as human beings endowed with reason, have a duty to pursue. We have a duty to try to understand the world around us, to make sense of reality, to seek knowledge, to possess it and to enjoy it. On the assumption that morality is not incoherent, therefore, there cannot also be a right to disbelieve the truth, in other words to believe falsehood. The point is *not* that there is no right to believe what you *know* to be false: if you know something to be false then you must believe it to be false, so you obviously cannot also believe it to be true. This is one kind of impossible act morality does not allow; but the point I am concerned with here is whether morality grants us the right to believe what is objectively false whether or not we know it to be false. Given that there is a duty to believe what is true, it would also be an impossible act morality allowed us to perform if we also had the right to believe what was false, since by performing the duty and exercising the alleged right we would again be engaged in believing a contradiction. Now whether it is logically or only psychologically impossible to believe a contradiction is irrelevant: if it cannot be done, there can be no right to do it, and something has to give. Since there is a duty to believe the true, there cannot also be a right to believe the false.

At this point one might be thinking that this whole approach to the ethics of belief is excessively voluntaristic, as though human beings were able to decide in each and every case whether or not to believe some proposition. Talk of rights only applies to cases where a person can act intentionally; but there are many kinds of belief where intention is out of the question because we simply cannot avoid belief. So how can the present position deal with such cases?

There are two possible responses to this objection, one more plausible than the other. The first is to deny that the position I am defending covers the category of involuntary belief, since talk of rights only applies where it is possible to act intentionally: if there can be no choice in the matter, there can be no question of rights, whether to truth or error in the case of belief, or to any other kind of act. While, however, it is plausible to argue that only beings with free will can have rights,[20] it is perhaps too strong to claim that for a being to possess the right to do X it has to be free in respect of X itself (where X is a particular act or kind of act). I have the right to

[20] See further *Applied Ethics*, ch. 3.

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breathe, digest my food and perspire on a hot day, although only in exceptional cases does a person have control over whether he does any of these things; but the right exists even where control does not.

The second and more plausible response is that even though some kinds of belief might be involuntary (e.g. certain kinds of perceptual belief), it does not follow that a person has the right to those beliefs even if they are false. For instance, in the case of optical illusion, a person might not be able to help believing that the parallel lines are converging, but this does not mean he has the *right* to believe they converge any more than in the voluntary case. Rather, he is not to be *blamed* for believing falsely that they converge. In this way involuntary belief is to be treated just like involuntary physical action: to return to the earlier example, if Patricia takes Rowena's bag because she is hypnotised into doing so, she is not to blame for the act but nor is it correct to say that she has a *right* to take what is not hers. Objectively she is under an obligation to respect others' property, but her current state absolves her from blame for not carrying it out. (Hence Kant's famous maxim 'ought implies can' needs to be understood correctly: an obligation can exist without the subject's being able to fulfil it, but non-fulfilment can never render the unfree subject responsible.) Similarly, the victim of optical illusion is objectively obliged to believe that the parallel lines are indeed parallel, and has no right to believe that they converge even if he cannot help himself so believing. But he is not to be blamed for his false belief. Therefore cases of involuntary belief do not undermine the thesis that there is no right to be wrong.

There are a number of clarifications that still need to be made. First, I am not denying that a person is *psychologically* free to believe falsehood, only that he is *morally* free to do so. There is not a person in the world who does not have some false belief. But psychological and moral freedom are not the same thing. To take an example, Brian is psychologically free to believe that his wife Celia is committing adultery, but if she gives every evidence of fidelity he is not morally free to believe it; indeed morally he is obliged to presume fidelity on her part unless the evidence against this is very strong. The same goes for falsehood itself. We are psychologically free to believe it, not morally free (subject to the remarks above about blameworthiness of belief, to which we ordinarily apply rights talk).

Secondly, as far as the idea mooted at the beginning of this paper is concerned, namely that the right to be wrong is necessary for the sake of freedom of belief, the answer must be that this is misguided because, strictly speaking, there *is* no freedom of belief. Morality itself demands that we seek and believe only the truth, since only

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the truth satisfies our rational nature. It is the truth that sets us free, not error. Of course knowing the truth is not always easy, especially in times such as these when diversity of opinion is prized as a great social value. Mill thought that truth would spring forth from this very diversity like a fountain fed by many tributaries. The reality, however, is that the more diversity of opinion there is *for the sake of diversity*, the harder it is to see even the most elementary truths. One might plausibly go further and assert that sheer diversity for diversity's sake not only obscures truth and is therefore unlikely to promote it, but also positively works *against* truth by sowing confusion, multiplying error, and encouraging despair in the truth-seeking individual that he will ever find the object of his pursuit. Freedom of belief, then, to the extent that it exists, should really be called freedom of opinion. It does not consist in the right to embrace falsehood, nor in the right of a society to contain diversity of belief just for the sake of it. Rather, it consists in the right of individuals to keep an open mind in matters where there is no certainty, where evidence points in different directions, and where people of intelligence and good will towards truth differ in their beliefs about some proposition or other. Freedom of opinion, then, exists only at the level of the assessment of evidence and only when evidence is genuinely equivocal. Anything else would not be freedom but slavery, just as the lost man wandering the desert without a map is free to explore any direction he likes but is in reality a slave to his ignorance. It is the man with a map who is truly free.

Thirdly, it has to be pointed out that freedom of belief is not the same as freedom from coercion. There may not be any freedom of belief in the sense of a moral right to embrace falsehood, but there is indeed a moral right not to be coerced into embracing truth. Elizabeth may have no right to believe that two and two make five, but she does have the right not to be forced into believing that they make four. The reason is that just as the fulfilment of our rational nature requires the embrace of truth, so it requires that embrace to be voluntary. Compelled belief perverts our reason just as much as false belief. We do not just have intellects, we also have free will: using one without the other cannot fulfil us, whether it be the use of our free will to believe whatever we like irrespective of what the evidence tells our intellect, or the use of our intellect to believe what the evidence tells us, not *because* of what it tells us but because our intellect is coerced in one direction rather than another. The only thing that should force our intellect is the weight of evidence, argument and authority. Which is not to say that people ought never to be pressured into thinking one thing rather than another. If Elizabeth tells you she is convinced that two and two make five, you

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would show an unedifying lack of concern for her intellectual welfare were you to shrug your shoulders and say, 'Oh, that's interesting—to each his own.' Surely you would remonstrate with her, try to make her 'see reason', maybe argue violently with her, even show obvious disgust. None of this would be wrong in itself, and it would all amount to subtle or not so subtle pressure. But if we are to respect the free will of each other as rational truth-seekers, pressure must never amount to coercion. Needless to say, you have no right to hold a gun to Elizabeth's head and hiss, 'Two and two make four: believe it—now!' But any pressure, to be both respectful of the individual and successful, must be applied as a means which is secondary to, and never a replacement for, the use of reason and evidence.

Which leads to my fourth and final point. The fact that various kinds of pressure are placed by people on one another all the time in order to make them 'see reason' goes to the second idea mooted at the beginning of this paper, namely that there is something inherently character-forming in the making of mistakes, that it is an aspect of 'personal development'. Far from being an aspect of personal development, the making of mistakes is a dangerous thing. Certainly one can be led into all sorts of trouble by believing certain truths, though I would suggest that most of this is the result of immorality on one's own part or the part of others. For instance, if I believe truly that my employer is corrupt and I do not keep my belief to myself, I may well suffer precisely because of my employer's corruption. Or if I believe truly that my friend is in financial trouble and I do not keep my belief to myself, then if I have been sworn to secrecy on the matter I may well suffer because of my own inability to keep a secret. With false belief, on the other hand, morality usually does not have anything to do with it. If you falsely believe that there is no glass door in front of you and you keep walking, you will end up hurting yourself. Failure to conform one's mind to reality (what the Schoolmen called *adequatio rei et intellectus*) can get you into big trouble.

This not to say, of course, that the risks attending false belief are primarily what make it a bad thing. Many people and communities have had all sorts of false beliefs—in pagan gods, for instance—and have got on fine for centuries. It might be claimed that belief in false gods kept Greece and Rome stable for many years in a way that would not have been possible had they had no religious beliefs at all. The survival value of some kinds of false belief need not be denied in order for the present position to be defended, since the defence rests primarily on the inherent value of true belief rather than its practical benefits. If this is so, then so much the worse for a pragmatic or instrumentalist justification of the right to false belief.

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Nevertheless, one might be tempted to argue that Greece and Rome maintained their lengthy stability not in virtue of the falsity of their pagan beliefs but *despite* it. Those features of pagan religion which made a positive contribution to pagan society were not the ones based on false beliefs but those based on true beliefs, including the belief that hubris leads to downfall, that society requires justice and order, that family life is sacrosanct, and—though atheists will of course disagree—the belief in one or more powerful spiritual beings who administered justice in this life and the next, who rewarded the good and punished the wicked, who were owed worship, and so on. If this line of argument were correct, as I think it is, the result would be that the field of practical success for false belief was much narrower than at first one might have thought. The pragmatist would be wrong both in principle and on the facts.

When it comes to looking at the benefits of true belief, the operation of the intellect in arriving at truth assumes its crucial role. The right and duty to believe truth is but one aspect of the good of truth. Pursuit, however, also involves using one's intellect in a way that maximizes the chances of arriving at truth rather than error. Without rules for the acquisition and weighing of evidence, the assessment of argument, the sifting of the self-evident from the probable, the probable from the possible, and so on, the acquisition of true belief is a hit and miss affair. False belief does often lead you into trouble, but this on its own is not a good enough basis for a rule maximizing one's chances of arriving at truth, and the reason for this is twofold. (i) We naturally would like to arrive at truth as much as possible without having to suffer the effects of falsehood first (compare: we want to know the right way to drive a car without having to have accidents first). (ii) The world's revenge on us for false belief is not always present: what gives us so much of our dignity as rational creatures is the fact that we are dedicated as a species to the pursuit of high-level, abstract, purely theoretical truths whose belief will offer us either no immediate practical reward or no reward at all, and whose disbelief will lead to no punishment.[21]

So the pursuit of truth requires us to use our intellects in the right way in order to maximize our chances of arriving at the truth. Suppose, however, we do not use our intellects in the right way and end up believing error. Well, none of us can avoid this completely, and as long as we are committed to truth we will eventually either rectify our errors or at least keep them relatively self-contained and at a minimum. But suppose a person subscribes to the view that making mistakes is a healthy part of self-development. To the

[21] For more on this see O'Hear, *Beyond Evolution*, chs 2–4, where evolutionary epistemology is subjected to convincing criticism.

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extent that this means merely that we learn from our mistakes, I would say it is a trivial proposition that is true in some but not all cases (see above regarding the world's revenge for false belief). To the extent, however, that it means there is something good in error, or that it just does not matter whether what you believe is true or false as long as you are involved in the character-building activity of *believing*, it is a pernicious and dangerous idea.

First, the person who does not use his intellect as a tool for arriving at truth rather than error is in danger of believing more and more falsehood by using his false beliefs as premises in subsequent reasoning.[22] False belief will have a radical multiplier effect, and we know that at its worst this leads, quite simply, to mental illness, in particular paranoia and delusional disorders.

Secondly, such a person is in danger of misjudging his moral duties and so causing injury to himself or others, which may or may not lead to any appreciable 'payback'. For instance, a politician who convinces himself that it is all right to lie to his wife is more likely than otherwise to think that it is all right to lie to his country. If you think it is permissible to cheat others in small matters, you are likely to end up cheating them in serious matters. Even if your initial error does not impinge upon your moral duties, it might be used as a premise in reasoning that leads to errors that do so impinge. Patricia might think Rowena's bag is hers—a purely factual error, but this is likely to lead to her taking it. Now as was said, such an act might be entirely blameless, but if Patricia does not make much of an effort to ascertain what is and is not her property, this will lead her to blameworthy acts. And if she is cavalier about the factual question whether the bag is hers, thinking she has a right to be wrong, she will have a hard time seeing just why her negligent taking of the bag is worthy of disapproval at all.

Finally, the more a person does not direct his intellect at truth, the greater the likelihood of his damaging his intellect and his ability to apprehend truth at all. The first way this happens is by the development of a bad habit. Every act of believing error when the intellect is not engaged in trying to minimize this risk leads to the taking over of the intellect by the will. Human beings are not pure intellects, as noted above—they have wills. But they also have passions, and emotions, and feelings, and desires, and we all know the danger of being led to act out of one of these rather than out of reasoned thought. There is nothing wrong in being motivated by desire or emotion to do certain things, and they play an essential role in practical reasoning. But it is, as a rule, wrong to act simply *because we want to*, or because it feels good. Given

[22] For the following ideas I am indebted to some unpublished notes by John S. Daly entitled 'Assent'.

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the ever-present risk of behaving in this way, the person who does not keep his intellect in the driver's seat, as it were, as regards the formation of belief, is likely to end up believing many things simply because he wants to. This may not apply to certain basic perceptual truths that we cannot avoid disbelieving, or maybe certain self-evident axioms of rational thought (though one should never underestimate the kinds of truth human beings are capable of voluntarily disbelieving), but it is very likely to apply to a whole range of propositions, including those whose belief or disbelief impinges on others. This leads to the withering of the intellect through *non-use* and hence of the ability to arrive at truth with any reliability.

The second way a person damages his intellect by not directing it at truth is not through the development of a bad habit but through the simple *abuse* of the faculty. It is evident that the intellectual faculty is given to us to believe the true and disbelieve the false. By not making every effort within one's limited powers to use it in this way, one distorts the faculty to the point of not being able to use it correctly. To take an analogy, although this is disputed by experts, my own experience tells me that the more I use glasses, the less able I am to focus correctly without them—I have to learn to focus correctly again, within the limits of my inherent optical defect. A person whose sense of balance is distorted by an inner ear infection has to overcompensate by feeling she is standing at an angle in order to be sure of standing straight. When she recovers, she will have lost her ability to recognize what her normal sense of balance is telling her, and will stagger about for a while until she relearns how to recognize and interpret the impulses from that sense. Similarly, a person who is cavalier about whether her intellect is directed at truth or falsehood ends up—again under various influences such as desire and emotion—forcing herself to believe what her intellect is naturally inclined to tell her is false; as a result, she will tend to become literally incapable of facing up to any unpleasant reality. Her intellect will be damaged, and repairing it by using her already-damaged intellect itself will not be much easier than using a broken telephone to call the telephone repairman.

Two further points about abuse of the intellect are worth noting. First, the abuse need not be self-administered. A person might, through little or no fault of his own, have his faculty for truth-seeking perverted by various forces: one need only think of advertising,[23]

[23] Strange and unpalatable as it may sound, the strict moral obligation of any advertiser is to report in his advertisement any known defect in what he is selling, as a supplement to his permissible factual description and modest exaggeration. Anything less amounts to wilful concealment of the truth in a matter of public welfare.

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so-called 'public relations' and the ubiquitous 'spin-doctoring', allegations and innuendoes masked as journalism, and various kinds of government propaganda. In many such cases the agents of the assault compound their primary offence with the further one of taking advantage of people who are not in a position to find out the truth for themselves. Secondly, the sorts of intellectual abuse just mentioned have a deleterious effect not just on individuals but on whole societies. The task of government is to protect and promote the common good, which it fails to do when it neglects to reverse, and even fosters, a climate in which lying in office, or under oath, or in the name of ambition, or even for the sake of the 'greater good', is taken to be acceptable. Citizens inevitably follow the example set by their leaders[24] and of course their public 'icons' (note the religious terminology): when they see lies being taken for the truth and the truth for lies in the public arena, there is no question whatsoever that they will regard this tacit acceptance as an equally tacit 'green light' to perpetrate their own falsehoods for whatever self-serving purposes. The whole climate of institutionalized lying that now permeates the public sphere weakens social stability, engenders an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion, and thereby makes it even harder for individuals to keep their intellects on the path of truth which their nature has set before them.

The 'right to be wrong' is, I conclude, a myth. There is an obligation to weigh evidence and to assess argument, and you may be blameless in your embracing of a falsehood as long as that embrace occurs *despite* the proper use of your intellect rather than as a consequence of its misuse. To say or imply, however, that a person has the *right* to embrace falsehood is to assist in the spreading of the sort of indifferentism and syncretism that is one of the hallmarks of contemporary society.[25]

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[24] Most people profess distaste for politicians mainly because they are thought to be nearly all liars, but it would be rash to conclude that the same people did not think that it was all right to lie because even politicians do it. And even if they did not think so, people are often unconsciously influenced in their behaviour in ways that run counter to their conscious standards.

[25] An earlier version of this paper was read at the University of Bradford in May 1999, and I am grateful for the comments received there. I am also indebted to John S. Daly for the ideas raised in his unpublished notes on assent, to Nicholas Denyer for an important correction and to Anthony O'Hear for his helpful suggestions.

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