

# Ambiguity and Logic

Frederic Schick

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## AMBIGUITY AND LOGIC

In this book, Frederic Schick extends and applies the decision theory he proposed in two previous Cambridge books: *Understanding Action* (1991) and *Making Choices* (1997). He shows how the way we see situations affects the choices we make, and he develops a logic of thought responsive to how things are seen.

The book considers many questions of choosing and some familiar human predicaments. Why do people in choice experiments act so often against expectations? How might they and the experimenters be looking at different problems in them? Why do people cooperate so often where the textbook logic excludes that? How can there be weakness of will – and must it always be faulted? Does how we see things affect what they *mean*, and what are people reporting who say that their lives have no meaning for them? These very different questions turn out to have some closely related answers.

There are vivid discussions here of cases drawn from many sources. The book will interest all who study how we choose and act, whether they are philosophers, psychologists, or economists – or any combination.

Frederic Schick is Professor of Philosophy at Rutgers University.



*for Kay, yet again*





## PREFACE

EACH of the essays in this book was written during the past five years. Only two have been published elsewhere. Each can be read on its own. Still, they were meant to be read in sequence; Essay 1 is general, Essay 2 more narrowly focused, Essay 3 more technical, etc. In a wholly perfect world, they would be read in the order presented.

An earlier version of Essay 3 appeared in *Economics and Philosophy* of 1999 (as "Status Quo Basing and the Logic of Value"). An earlier version of Essay 5 appeared in *The Journal of Philosophy* of 2000 (as "Surprise, Self-Knowledge, and Commonality"). Essay 2 is a revised version of a paper that will appear in *Synthese*. I thank the editors and publishers of these journals for their permission to reprint these papers.

Each of these papers, or some earlier version, has been presented to one or another academic group, at Lund University and Uppsala University in Sweden, at Cambridge University in England, at Columbia, the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, the University of Arizona, the New School University, and others in the United States. I thank the audiences at these meetings for their lively and useful discussions.

Finally, a special thanks to my friends – they know who they are – who have encouraged me in this. And a very special thanks to those who encouraged me though they weren't persuaded.



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## LIVING WITH AMBIGUITY

SAY we are fully informed. Say we know all we could possibly know. Still, there remains ambiguity. What we now do is ambiguous, and what that will bring about is too, and so is all that would have happened if we had done something else instead. How we act in any setting depends on how we there get around this, on how we disambiguate there. And our later making sense of our actions calls for our knowing how we did it.

## 1

Let me begin with some stories that may help to bring that out. The first will be about me, and it will do me little credit.

When this happened, I was thirty and on my first good job. I then had two particular friends – call them Adam and Bob. Adam was lively and good-looking. Women liked him and he liked women. Bob too liked women, but they cared for him less, and he ached for what Adam had. He would always ask about Adam, hoping at least to feed fantasies, but I knew nothing he wanted to hear, so I couldn't oblige him.

Then, one day, I did. To his "What's new with Adam?" I said "He moved; he had to." Bob asked why. "Because it was three o'clock in the morning and he had the music on loud, and the landlord came up from downstairs" – I was making all this up – "...and found him in bed with two women and evicted him."

Bob was staggered and went home in a sweat. I thought it funny and went to tell Adam, but it turned out he wasn't

in town, and he still was out of town when I saw Bob the next time. Right off, Bob asked about Adam, and I made up a new story for him about how Adam had thrown a big party to celebrate his new apartment and how the noise got the police to be called and how they responded to what the guests, both dressed and undressed, were doing. Bob could hardly breathe for excitement.

A few days later, Adam called. He began with "Are you out of your mind?", and with that the scales fell from my eyes. I had no answer to give him. I was now the one who was staggered; what I had done did now seem crazy and I could scarcely credit having done it. All of us taught at a straight-laced college, and Adam was up for promotion just then. The stories I was telling about him were enough to get him fired instead. I had known that all along. I knew I was putting his job at risk but I did it anyway, and thought it funny as I did it. I saw it as a joke, as pulling Bob's leg, as horsing around with friends.

I had seen what I did as a joke; now I saw it as a kind of betrayal. But that made no change in what I *believed* I had done, in what I *knew* about that. Neither did it change what I wanted. I wanted before to joke with my friends, and I still wanted that. I wanted now not to injure them, but I had wanted that before too. What changed was how I *saw* things – again, Adam's call refocused my mind: it gave me a new perspective. Had I seen things that way before, I would not have done what I did. Still, how could a change of perspective alone have unsettled what moved me to act? The usual theory of motivation – the usual theory of reasons for action – speaks of beliefs and desires only. How did the way I came to see things connect with the beliefs and desires I had?

Enough about Adam and Bob. Let me turn to an incident I have discussed at length before,<sup>1</sup> this one reported by George Orwell in an essay on the Spanish Civil War. Orwell tells of lying in wait in a field one day, hoping for a chance to shoot at some soldiers in the trenches ahead. For a long time, no one

appeared. Then some planes flew over, which took the Fascists by surprise, there was much shouting and blowing of whistles, and a man

... jumped out of the trench and ran along the top of the parapet in full view. He was half-dressed and was holding up his trousers with both hands as he ran. I refrained from shooting at him. . . . I did not shoot partly because of that detail about the trousers. I had come here to shoot at "Fascists"; but a man holding up his trousers isn't a "Fascist," he is visibly a fellow-creature, similar to yourself, and you don't feel like shooting at him.<sup>2</sup>

Orwell wanted to "shoot at Fascists" and he believed he now could do it. On the belief/desire theory, he had a solid reason for shooting. What then was it about those pants that got him to put down his gun? Orwell answers that question: "a man holding up his trousers . . . is visibly a fellow-creature, similar to yourself." I take it the pants were down to his knees, and that Orwell is saying that someone half-naked and "visibly" human had to be seen as human. Before the man jumped out of the trench, Orwell had seen his firing at him as shooting at a fascist, which he wanted to do. The soldier's half-naked predicament was for him a wake-up call – like Adam's call to me. He then saw his firing at him as his shooting at a fellow-creature, and this he didn't "feel like" doing.

He had, of course, known all along that, under their pants, the fascists were human. He had never *faced* that fact, never fully confronted it, but how did his not having faced it weaken the force of his knowing it? And how could he want to kill a fascist and also not *feel like* doing it? How can a change in a person's seeings undercut what he wants to do?

The third story here is fictional, though it recalls an actual case and is formally like many others.<sup>3</sup> Jack and Jill are at a company banquet. Recent employees and the youngest ones there, they are seated in a corner of the room, where they notice, while the others are eating, that they hadn't been served.



The kitchen had run out of food. They were least likely to make a fuss and so had been picked for doing without.

Jill suggests that they leave and get burgers. Jack is firmly opposed. He says he has paid \$50 for dinner and won't pay a nickel more. Jill says the \$50 is spent and gone; the question is whether to leave and get a \$5 burger or starve. Jack insists she has that wrong: the question is whether to pay \$55 and get just a burger or starve. Fifty-five dollars is too much for dinner, never mind for a burger dinner – he prefers to starve. They argue this back and forth. In the end, they go out to eat.

How did Jill move Jack? (It was too early for hunger to have done it.) He had a belief/desire reason both for staying and for leaving. He wanted not to pay \$55 for dinner and he knew he wouldn't pay that if he stayed. But he also wanted a burger and knew that leaving meant getting one. Jill didn't change his beliefs; she told him nothing he didn't know. Nor did she get him to agree with her judgment of what a burger was worth. He agreed with her all along that a burger was worth \$5. What she did was to get him to stop seeing that burger as a \$55 dinner – she got him to see it as a \$5 dinner. She changed his perspective on leaving to get it. But how did his new view of leaving unsettle the reason he had for staying?

2

I have presented three cases – my leg-pulling prank, Orwell's putting down his gun, Jack's leaving to get a burger. In none does the belief/desire theory fully explain what happened. On that two-factor theory, a person has a reason for taking action *a* where he wants to take an action of a certain sort *b* and he believes *a* is of sort *b*. I wanted to play a joke on Bob and believed I was doing that. But I also wanted to be a proper friend of Adam's and knew that this called for some self-restraint. I had as good a two-factor reason for holding back as for doing what I did. Why then did I not hold back? Likewise for Orwell

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