GETTIER BELIEFS AND SERIOUS BELIEFS: A REPLY TO BIRO AND FORRAI

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ABSTRACT: In a recent exchange in the pages of this journal, John Biro responds to Gabor Forrai's argument against Biro's argument that in most, if not all, Gettier cases the belief condition, *contra* popular opinion, isn't satisfied. In this note, I'll argue that Biro's response to Forrai satisfactorily resolves the first of Forrai's two central objections to Biro's argument that the belief condition isn't satisfied in most, if not all, Gettier cases. But Biro's response leaves mostly unaddressed the most plausible way of construing Forrai's second objection. I'll take up the mantle of successfully defending Biro's argument from this more plausible construal of Forrai's second objection. However, even though I'll argue that Biro's argument is in good shape with respect to Forrai's objections, I'll show that the definition of serious belief that Biro offers us is mistaken.

KEYWORDS: John Biro, Gabor Forrai, Gettier case, serious belief, assert, action

In a recent exchange in the pages of this journal, John Biro[1] responds to Gabor Forrai's[2] argument against Biro's argument[3] that in most, if not all, Gettier cases the belief condition, *contra* popular opinion, isn't satisfied.

To, briefly, recapitulate this exchange. In his paper "Non-Pickwickian Belief and 'the Gettier Problem'," Biro argues, at least in part, that the belief that subjects allegedly have in most, if not all, Gettier cases is a belief in merely a pickwickian sense. In other words, it's not a serious belief, where, for Biro, a serious belief is onethat, *inter alia*, guides action[4] and adequately reflects preparedness or willingness to assert the proposition believed.[5] And, Biro thinks, it's a serious, non-

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[1] John Biro, "No Reprieve for Gettier "Beliefs": A Reply to Forrai," *Logos & Episteme* X, 3 (2019): 327-331.

[2] Gabor Forrai, "Gettiered Beliefs are Genuine Beliefs: A Reply to Gaultier and Biro,"*Logos & Episteme* X, 2 (2019): 217-224.

[3] In John Biro, "Non-Pickwickian Belief and 'the Gettier Problem'," *Logos & Episteme* VIII, 3 (2017): 47-69.

[4] In this paper, by "action" I mean "action or omission."

[5] Biro, "Non-Pickwickian Belief and 'the Gettier Problem'," 53, 68.

pickwickian belief that the Gettier case subject must have in order to count as satisfying the belief condition for knowing.[6]

Forrai, on other hand, resists Biro's argument on dual grounds. First, Forrai argues—somewhat awkwardly—that there could be, *contra* Biro, a circumstance where some epistemic subject, S, counts as seriously believing that p, even though, S isn't prepared to assert that p.[7] Second, Forrai argues that some actions aren't guided by single beliefs, but rather by "constellations of beliefs."[8] Take, for instance, the belief that Rod's couch is comfy. Even though I believe this, I might not sit on Rod's comfy couch, since I also believe that Rod's overly sensitive about people sitting on his comfy couch. Forrai's point is that what guides my omission of not sitting on Rod's couch is not my belief that Rod's couch is comfy, but my belief that Rod's overly sensitive about people sitting on his comfy couch. Hence, Forrai argues, there will be at least some serious beliefs that can't be said to guide action, at least not in a certain sense. Even still, Forrai thinks, those beliefs are serious beliefs.

The above reconstruction of Forrai's general argument represents some reading between the lines on my part. This is mostly the result of some unclarity on Forrai's part on how his criticisms of Biro actually connect up with Biro's view in a genuinely problematic way. Perhaps, this unclarity still persists. To see both of the above lines of argument more clearly, then, let's consider the following two cases adapted from Forrai:[9]

> **NoSay.** Suppose Jim wants to buy a used Ford and he believes that Havit's Ford is up for sale. Jim, however, was told that if he asserted that Havit's Ford is up for sale, then he wouldn't be able to buy it.

> **NoSale.** Suppose Greg wants to buy a used Ford and he believes that Havit's Ford is up for sale. It would then be perfectly rational for Greg to talk to Havit about buying it. However, if Greg also believes that Havit would not sell him his car because he hates Greg's guts, Greg would not talk to Havit about buying his Ford.

In NoSay, Jim wouldn't be willing to assert that Havit's Ford is up for sale, although, intuitively, Jim seriously believes that Havit's Ford is up for sale. If being willing to assert that p is a necessary condition for seriously believing that p, as Biro alleges, then Jim doesn't count as seriously believing that Havit's Ford is up for sale.[10] But, of course, that's the intuitively incorrect result.

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[6] Biro, "Non-Pickwickian Belief and 'the Gettier Problem'," 59.

[7] Forrai, "Gettiered Beliefs are Genuine Beliefs: A Reply to Gaultier and Biro," 221.

[8] *Ibid.*, 222.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Biro, "No Reprieve for Gettier "Beliefs": A Reply to Forrai," 328.

In NoSale, Greg believes that Havit's Ford is up for sale and he wants to buy a used Ford, but Greg actively avoids talking with Havit about buying his Ford. If guiding action, in Forrai's sense, is a necessary condition for seriously believing that p, as one might read Biro as suggesting, then Greg doesn't count as seriously believing that Havit's Ford is up for sale.[11] The reason is that the belief that Havit's Ford is up for sale isn't what guides Greg's omission of not talking with Havit about purchasing the Ford. That would be Greg's belief that Havit won't sell him the Ford because he hates his guts. Yet, intuitively, Greg seriously believes that Havit's Ford is up for sale, even though, that belief doesn't guide Greg's omission of not talking with Havit about purchasing his Ford.

In the most recent paper in this exchange, Biro appears to rather neatly navigate both of Forrai's worries by adopting a *ceteris paribus* clause. Roughly, S counts as seriously believing that p only if, *ceteris paribus*, both S is prepared to assert that p and S's belief that p guides S's action. Let's call this Biro's Principle.

Applying Biro's Principle to NoSay, we see that, all things considered, Jim wouldn't be prepared to assert that Havit's Ford is up for sale, but, other things equal, he would be. For Biro, that's all being prepared or willing to assert that p comes to. This, then, swiftly resolves Forrai's first worry.

Applying Biro's Principle to NoSale, we see that, all things considered, Greg wouldn't talk to Havit about purchasing his Ford, but, other things equal, Greg would. Again, for Biro, all belief guiding action comes to is that, *ceteris paribus*, S's belief that p guide action. This, then, apparently nicely resovles Forrai's second worry.

Yet such resolution of Forrai's second worry is only apparent. The reason is that Biro overlooks how Forrai intends to characterize what it is for belief to guide action. Forrai appears to think that S's belief that p guides some action, A, only if the reason why S A-ed was her belief that p.[12] In which case, adding a *ceteris paribus* clause is of little help with NoSale, since, other things being equal, Greg's belief that Havit's Ford is up for sale won't guide, in Forrai's sense, Greg's omission of not talking to Havit about purchasing his Ford. Thus, on Forrai's characterization of belief guiding action, Biro's Principle doesn't yield the correct result in NoSale that Greg's belief that Havit's Ford is up for sale is a serious belief.

However, I think there's fairly simple response available to Biro here. To see this, consider the following case:

> **Book.** Suppose Tim believes that a copy of *Waverly* is in his office and he wants it. There are three routes Tim can take turning out of his driveway. One route goes

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[11] Biro, "Non-Pickwickian Belief and 'the Gettier Problem'," 68.
[12] Forrai, "Gettiered Beliefs are Genuine Beliefs: A Reply to Gaultier and Biro," 222.

> to Tim's office and passes a Publix. One route doesn't pass a Publix, but it goes to
> Tim's office. One route goes the opposite direction of Tim's office, but it passes a
> Publix. Both Publix's are the same distance from Tim's driveway. Tim believes
> that he needs some milk for the house, so he decides to take the route that goes to
> his office and passes a Publix. On the way to his office, Tim stops at Publix and
> picks up some milk.

Now, Forrai's conception of belief guiding action yields the result that Tim's belief that a copy of *Waverly* is in his office doesn't guide his action of picking up milk from Publix, since Tim's belief that a copy of *Waverly* is in his office isn't the reason why Tim picks up milk from Publix. Indeed, the reason why Tim picks up milk from Publix is that he believes that he needs milk at the house.

Yet, intuitively, it is wrong to think that Tim's belief that a copy of *Waverly* is in his office doesn't guide his action of picking up milk from Publix. One way of sustaining this intuition is by noting that Tim chooses the route to his office that he does, at least to some obvious extent, on the basis of his belief that a copy of *Waverly* is in his office. If he didn't have that belief, then he might just as well rationally choose the route that passes Publix but doesn't go to his office. In Book, however, if he did that, he would be acting irrationally. But, on Forrai's view, Tim picking up milk from Publix by taking either route that passes Publix would be equally rational, since, on Forrai's view, the only belief that guides Tim's action is his belief that he needs milk at the house. Yet, certainly, it wouldn't be rational for Tim to take the route that passes Publix, but goes in the opposite direction of his office, given that he believes a copy of *Waverly* is in his office. This signals to me, then, that, quite plausibly, Forrai's conception of what it is for belief to guide action is mistaken.

But, of course, this invites a question: What is it for a belief to guide action? In this connection, I propose the following view of what it is for belief to guide action:

> For S's belief that p to guide S's action in circumstance, C, S's belief that p must
> inform whatever S, in fact, does in C.[13]

To see the view more clearly, let's consider an example. Suppose I want a beer and I believe, seriously, that my fridge is empty of beer. That belief is rationally consistent with my doing all sorts of things, like going to the store to get beer, calling my wife to pick some beer up from the store, not getting any beer at all, and so on. But what the belief that my fridge is empty of beer is not rationally

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[13] Note, on such a view, for S to have a serious belief that p in C, S's belief that p needn't be the reason why S performs whatever action he performs in C.

consistent with is my going to the fridge to get a beer or telling my pal, Julie, that there's a beer in the fridge. In other words, my belief that there aren't any beers in the fridge guides the action that I do perform insofar as it "tells" me that some doings *are* and some doings *aren't* available to me as a rational agent.

Now let's consider NoSale once more. Greg's belief that Havit's Ford is up for sale can be said to guide Greg's omission of not talking to Havit about purchasing his Ford only if it "communicates" the space of doings that are and aren't available to him as a rational agent. And, to my mind, that's exactly one way, *inter alia*, that Greg's belief that Havit's Ford is up for sale functions in NoSale.

Interestingly, this line of reasoning appears to be consonant with the way that Biro thinks about how serious belief guides action. As Biro comments, a mark of serious belief "is that it guides action. If I am in the market for a used Ford and believe that Havit owns the one in the parking lot, it would *not* be *rational* for me to go around asking who owns it" (emphasis mine).[14] In other words, a serious belief guides action only if it makes clear what doings fall inside and outside the scope of rational doings. Thus, as far as I can see then, Biro's view of serious belief is in good shape with respect to both of Forrai's worries.

However, I'll close by showing that Biro's view isn't free from danger completely. Biro[15] offers us the following definition of serious, non-pickwickian belief:

> **Biro's Definition.** For any set of propositions such that one knows that one of them follows from the others but could be true even if those others were not, one believes the entailed proposition if and only if one would believe it even if one did not believe (all) the entailing ones.

Biro's Definition is intended to give us a general account for what makes a belief serious. But does Biro's Definition apply to all beliefs or only Gettier beliefs? Realistically, there are two answers available to Biro here, but neither answer seems very satisfying. One is that for *any* belief to be serious it must satisfy Biro's Definition. The other is that *only* Gettier beliefs—the beliefs at issue in Gettier cases—must satisfy Biro's Definition in order to count as serious beliefs.[16]

The former answer appears to render Biro's Definition false. To see this, consider the following scenario:

> **Raven.** Suppose I believe, falsely, that every bird is a raven. I know that the false proposition, every bird is a raven, entails the true proposition that the bird on my front porch is a raven, and so, on this basis alone, I come to believe, truly, that the

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[14] Biro, "Non-Pickwickian Belief and 'the Gettier Problem'," 68.

[15] In Biro, "No Reprieve for Gettier "Beliefs": A Reply to Forrai," 330.

[16] It's worth noting that this is Biro's (conversation) preferred answer.

> bird on my front porch is a raven. Let's call the bird on my front porch, Bird$_1$. Suppose I think to myself, "Wow. In seeing Bird$_1$, I've finally seen a raven." Further suppose that I tell my wife and kids that Bird$_1$ is a raven. I call the local aviary and tell them that I've found a raven, namely, Bird$_1$. I even try, unsuccessfully, to have Bird$_1$ become a member of an unkindness (flock) of ravens.

Now, Biro's Definition yields the result that I don't believe, at least seriously, that Bird$_1$ is a raven, since if I didn't believe that every bird is a raven, then I wouldn't believe that Bird$_1$ is a raven. Yet, intuitively, I seriously believe that Bird$_1$ is a raven. After all, I clearly think of myself as believing that Bird$_1$ is a raven, I tell my wife and kids that Bird$_1$ is a raven, I call the local aviary to tell them that Bird$_1$ is a raven, and I even try to have Bird$_1$ become a member of an unkindness of ravens. Quite plausibly, then, I seriously believe that Bird$_1$ is a raven. If this interpretation of Raven is correct, as seems eminently reasonable, then, on the former answer, Biro's Definition must be mistaken.

The latter answer, while it avoids the problem above, strikes me as *ad hoc*. On its face, it appears that placing conditions of seriousness of belief on Gettier beliefs, but not ordinary beliefs, would simply be a way for Biro to get his desired result that the belief condition isn't satisfied in most Gettier cases and, yet, avoid the problem above. Beyond this, though, it's not clear what could motivate placing conditions of seriousness of belief on just the beliefs at issue in Gettier cases.