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Marušić on the conditions for promising and deciding

- Berislav Marušić, 'Belief and Difficult Action', *Philosophers' Imprint* 12(18): 1-30, 2012.
- shows that, given certain characteristics of promises and decisions, there are conditions for promises and decisions that require beliefs about what we will do.
- In most non-evidentialist proposals in the contemporary debate, there is an insistence on the usefulness of a belief regardless of its truth.
- Marušić's proposal is interesting because it defends a form of non-evidentialism where the question of the truth of the belief is not irrelevant: the belief expresses something that we want to 'make' true through our actions.



Marušić on the conditions for promising and deciding

- The epistemological problem of difficult action:
- ‘On the one hand, if we believe that we will do what we are deciding or promising to do, then, it seems, we believe against the evidence, for, since we have evidence that it is difficult to do it, it seems that we have reason to doubt that we will do it. On the other hand, if we don’t believe that we will do what we are deciding or promising to do, then, it seems, our decision is not serious and our promise is not sincere.’ (1)



Marušić on the conditions for promising and deciding

- Example for deciding:
- ‘Suppose you decide to quit smoking. ...However, as serious and firm as your decision can be, you know that it is statistically very likely that you will smoke again. ...Should you, at that moment, believe that you will succeed in quitting? On the one hand, to say that you should believe it seems to imply that you should believe something that goes against your evidence.... On the other hand, to say that...you should not believe that you won't smoke anymore seems to prevent you from making your decision seriously’ (2-3).



Marušić on the conditions for promising and deciding

- Example for promising:
- ‘You are standing before a justice of the peace and are about to promise to be with your spouse the rest of your life. However, you know the divorce rates, and thus you have evidence that it is fairly likely that you won’t, in fact, spend the rest of your life with your spouse.... At that moment, should you believe that you will, indeed, be with your spouse the rest of your life? On the one hand, if you believe it, your belief goes against the evidence. (The justice of the peace or your wedding photographer, clearly, shouldn’t believe it.) On the other hand, if you don’t believe it, your promise won’t be sincere.’ (3)



Marušić on the conditions for promising and deciding

- The problem arises because we have to violate one of these principles:
 - *The Evidentialist Principle*: If we have evidence that it is likely that not p , we should not believe p .
 - *Seriousness Condition on Decisions*: Our decision is serious only if we believe that we will do what we are deciding to do.
 - *Sincerity Condition on Promises*: Our promise is sincere only if we believe that we will do what we are promising to do. (4)



Marušić on the conditions for promising and deciding

- The sincerity condition on promises:
 - Visible by comparison with assertion.
 - 'Since a necessary condition for sincerely saying 'I will ϕ ' consists in believing that one will ϕ , believing that one will ϕ is also a necessary condition for sincerely saying, 'I will ϕ , I promise' and 'I promise I will ϕ .' In fact, asserting, 'I will ϕ ' in the right circumstances can be a way of making the same promise as one would make in saying 'I promise to ϕ .'
- (5)



Marušić on the conditions for promising and deciding

- The seriousness condition on decisions:
- ‘Why should believing be necessary for seriously deciding? Let me offer two arguments in defense of this thesis. First, typically, one’s decision is serious only if one plans accordingly; if one acts as if one will, in fact, do it; and if one is prepared to assert as if one will do what one has decided to do. ...My second argument in favor of the thesis that believing is necessary for seriously deciding is that believing that it is likely that we won’t do what we are deciding to do is a disabling condition for seriously deciding it. Here is why: Our decision to do something is meant to settle for us the question of what we will do. If we decide to do something, we thereby mean to settle what we will do. But if, at the same time, we also believe that it is likely that we will not do it, then it is not settled for us that we will do it. Hence, our decision is not serious.’ (6)



Marušić on the conditions for promising and deciding

- The pragmatist response:
 - ‘According to PR, because we reach our view about our future actions through practical reasoning, our beliefs about our future actions are to be evaluated by the standards of practical reasoning. Hence, we should believe that we will do what we are deciding or promising to do, if it is practically rational to seriously decide or sincerely promise to do it. PR thus rejects the Evidentialist Principle.’ (19)



Marušić on the conditions for promising and deciding

- Three 'simple' answers:
- What is rational to do is to promise/decide to 'try': if our trying has substance, it implies belief; if it does not, it is not sufficiently distinguishable from not promising/deciding.
- One must distinguish between types of norms: it does not solve the problem.
- The right 'degree' of belief must be determined:
 - Promising or deciding do not require a degree of belief sufficient for full belief: not plausible.
 - It is incorrect to speak of full belief: The object of promises/decisions is not determined in degrees. If there is a belief-related condition with respect to promises/decisions, why must it be determined in such a way instead?



Marušić on the conditions for promising and deciding

- The evidentialist response:
- In cases like those in the examples, the rational thing to do is to avoid promising or deciding.
- ‘The Evidentialist Principle implies that if we have evidence that it is likely that (we won’t ϕ , if we seriously decide or sincerely promise to ϕ), we shouldn’t believe that (we will ϕ , if we seriously decide or sincerely promise to ϕ). From the Official Bridge Principle, we can then infer that, in the problematic cases, we shouldn’t decide or promise to do what we have evidence is difficult to do.’ (11)



Marušić on the conditions for promising and deciding

- Three objections:
 - ‘it implies that too many decisions and promises are impermissible’.
(11)
 - ‘For example, we might promise to save up money for a house, to take care of our parents when they are old, and to behave better around the holidays. We might decide to read all of Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past next summer, to finally get our children to eat some vegetables, or to learn to dance the tango. We might decide or promise to exercise once a week, to be financially more responsible, to quit smoking, or to learn Chinese — despite having excellent evidence that it is likely that we will fail. It is, I think, disheartening to hold that we should not make such decisions and promises.’ (11-12)



Marušić on the conditions for promising and deciding

- Three objections:
 - ‘it fails to properly address the Epistemological Problem of Difficult Action, precisely because the problem is epistemological’. (12)
 - ‘Given that we are deciding or promising to do what we have evidence is difficult to do, what should we believe about our future action? It is not clear how it helps to learn that we shouldn’t make the decision or promise in the first place. ER is only a proper response to the practical counterpart to the present problem.’ (12)



Marušić on the conditions for promising and deciding

- Three objections:
 - ‘ER evaluates the problematic decisions and promises, which are conclusions of practical reasoning, in terms of the standards of theoretical reasoning. But that is an evaluation by appeal to the wrong kind of reasons’. (12)
 - ‘Whether to decide or promise to do something is to be settled by determining what to do; it is a question which is to be settled by practical reasoning, and our answer to it is to be assessed in terms of the standards of practical reasoning. Yet ER implies that the question whether to decide or promise to do something that we have evidence is difficult to do should be settled by the fact that we have evidence that it is difficult to do it. This, I think, is implausible’. (12)



Marušić's examples

- ‘Suppose you decide to quit smoking. ...However, as serious and firm as your decision can be, you know that it is statistically very likely that you will smoke again. ...Should you, at that moment, believe that you will succeed in quitting? On the one hand, to say that you should believe it seems to imply that you should believe something that goes against your evidence.... On the other hand, to say that...you should not believe that you won't smoke anymore seems to prevent you from making your decision seriously’ (2-3)



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