

A Priori Seminar 16/2/18

Attending: Josh Thorpe, Sam Symons, Crispin Wright, Paul Conlan, Indrek Lobus, Xintong Wei, Alisa Mandrigin, Peter Sullivan, Giacomo Melis, Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa, Gabriela Besler

Reading: Lawlor 2002 memory, anaphora, and content preservation

Presenting: Paul

1. On the set-up

Peter suggested that Burge's argument does not actually hinge on apriority, rather the gist of Burge's proposal is to show that if we are to have any inferential justification (no matter whether it is a priori or not), then preservative memory must play a role in it.

Giacomo replied that Lawlor aims to show that memory can play the preservative role in Burge's sense. If memory always plays a substantial role, then all inferences would be empirical (because they would all involve an empirical premise). Peter added that if so there couldn't be inference at all because you would need something to link each step of your thought which itself does not figure in the premise of your reasoning. This is roughly the synthesis of reproduction in Kant.

Giacomo pointed out that there are two contributions of memory to one's a priori warrant (in a proof). One allows you to survey what you have done so far in the proof; the other provides you with a previously proved lemma when it is needed during some intermediate step of the proof.

Crispin asked Peter how would he relate what he just said to the Wittgensteinian idea that a proof must be surveyable? Surveyability is to have an oversight of what you have achieved, to understand what you have done and also how well you have done. It is different from the series of sequence of attentions in a step-by-step examination.

Peter replied that Burge would want his central point to hold even for what he called 'working memory', even in a one-step deduction. With a long deduction, it is difficult. For example, perhaps the lemma you rely on 4 pages back is now out of your mind, but in some sense the process of your doing the proof holds the steps together. But how it holds things together is a difficult issue. It might be that the only way (to show that it holds) is to reconstruct the entire proof.

2. The Viking case, on section 2.2&2.3 on handout

2.1 Sense of 'conditioning'

Paul observed that the sense in which memory is 'conditioned' by background beliefs is crucial. Crispin clarified that for C&K (Christensen and Kornblith, reading of seminar 4), what preservative memory delivers is partly supported/sanctioned by background beliefs, which is broadly a Quinean picture. On this picture, nothing gets justification in isolation.

Giacomo added that one way to phrase the dispute is to draw on the enabling/warranting distinction. The issue at hand is whether background beliefs play a merely enabling role, not a warranting role in preservative memory. Crispin pointed out that the argument in section 2.2 is suspect of genetic fallacy. The idea that something should be rejected because of its suspicious origin.

Peter agreed and pointed out that an episode of memory is often available because of its inferential connections with other background beliefs. Isolated facts are famously difficult to remember. It seems that in the Viking case, background beliefs play this causally sustaining role rather than an inferential role. The two are distinct and the former role is weaker than the latter.

Crispin agreed and added an example where two subjects have the experience of the same episodes, but they recollect different things given their different background beliefs.

2.2 Another way to interpret the Viking example?

Giacomo suggested that the difference between Sam and Sophie may be explained in terms of defeaters. We might think that Sam's belief is defeated, because all the other false background beliefs that are related with the recalled belief suggest that Sam is unreliable with respect to the relevant subject matter (Vikings). In contrast, Sophie's belief is not defeated.

Peter replied that it is not the case that Sam's belief is not warranted just because Sam is in general wrong (with many of his other beliefs) whereas Sophie is general right. The defeater story would be one explanation, but it does not engage in with the causal mechanism producing beliefs based on memory. Giacomo replies that the explanation provided would not need to engage with the underlying causal mechanisms because it gives directly an account that holds at the normative level of justification/defeat. After all, that is the level we are primarily interested in.

2.3 Does the case actually cause any damage to Burge's proposal?

Josh argued that even if the Vikings case is right it would not affect Burge's ultimate aim, which he takes it to be the claim that deduction based on memory can be a priori. In the Vikings case, the sustaining background beliefs are empirical. Josh suggested that the case of mathematics might be different: arguably, it is harder to think of a mathematical proposition as inferentially connected to empirical belief.

Paul pointed out that a mathematical proposition can be 'tinged' by empirical beliefs. Indrek gave the example of arriving at the proposition $2+2=4$ from counting two apples and another two apples. Crispin gave another example of someone does a proof but gets his lemmas from a conspiracy textbook.

Josh doubted that one can get a *proof* from reading a conspiracy textbook. Crispin replied that perhaps his proof involves some big steps, and he has the impression that he can make it. Josh maintained that if Burge's goal is to show a priori knowledge based on long deduction is possible, then C&K's argument fails.

Peter clarified that C&K's argument is to show background beliefs are relevant to the justificatory force of the proposition sustained by those beliefs. They claim that the justificatory status of those empirical beliefs would damage the justification of the belief they causally sustain. But they do not claim to show there is no a priori knowledge. Crispin agreed and added that the result is there is no inferential a priori knowledge involved memory.

3. Anaphora

Crispin wondered how does the anaphora makes the content available. The content an anaphora refers to is available to me not simply because I understand the anaphoric pronoun but rather I understand the pronoun because I already have that content in my mind. The anaphora does not seem to be doing any work in preserving the content. What is it that makes the content accessible later on? Linguistic anaphora never does that. Arguably, unless one understands the context and already has that content in mind, one cannot access that content. If the jump from linguistic to mental anaphora were to be successful, Lawlor must show how mental anaphora can do the job. Carrie agreed that it would be a problem if the anaphora relies on the phenomenon we try to unpack.

Peter wondered about what motivates the choice of anaphora as a model for content preservation. Burge's motivation, as Peter has pointed out at the beginning of the seminar, is to look for the connection that holds sequence of thoughts together but itself does not appear in form of another premise in the reasoning. But a linguistic anaphora cannot solve the problem. Anaphora is *de jure* content preservative, but so is using the same word twice. Josh also wondered whether an anaphora can preserve the justificatory force as well as the content, and the former is of great significance in Burge's proposal. Giacomo suggests that anaphora, just like preservative memory, does not add any epistemic weight to the content it brings to the fore. Sam noted that it seems to be epistemically inert: anaphora does not seem able to perform the epistemic work Lawlor requires of it.

4. A doubt on whether Lawlor's proposal actually tackle C&K's objection

Carrie pointed out that one of the main contention of C&K is that the way memory works is infused by surrounding background beliefs and that involvement has impact on epistemology. Lawlor seems to be saying, there is a different model how preservative memory works. But C&K takes their claim to be empirically supported by cognitive science. If C&K are right about that, it's not clear that Lawlor's project does not address CK's concern. Crispin agreed—even if Lawlor's model is coherent, C&K's reply would simply be that this is not how memory works.

Giacomo suggested a more charitable reading of Lawlor: she's presenting us with a model of how memory works that acknowledges a role to the net of related background belief, but without allowing that those background beliefs play the inferential role that C&K assign to them. Lawlor shows how memory can be constructive (C&K's term) without using background beliefs as premises in an inference. Carrie added that we could say that Lawlor's point is that that C&K have misinterpreted the empirical studies on memory that they mention.

5. How does mental anaphora preserve justificatory force of the content?

Crispin questioned how does the story about mental anaphora give us the preservation of justificatory force?

Giacomo suggested that since anaphoric thinking is epistemically neutral, we might think that it preserves whatever justificatory force the content originally had. Paul added that Lawlor's contention is that background beliefs don't provide any justification to the belief it sustains. Maybe this negative claim is all Lawlor needs (to give us the preservation of justificatory force).

Carrie questioned to what extent the proposal is about epistemology. Anaphora is about syntax, not epistemology. Carrie cannot see how Lawlor has shown anaphora does any epistemological work.

Crispin considers the following example: suppose you made a proof with good grounds. But you forget about the steps, you just remember that it is a good proof. In some sense he preserves the justification but it is not a justification available to him. It is rational to rehearse the steps again. In the case where I forget the justification, it seems that I'm epistemically worst off.

Giacomo replied that general reliability in the relevant domain is relevant. Forgetting the original proof might be a defeater if you cannot trust yourself to be reliable. Crispin replied that then it's an empirical matter whether I'm a reliable mathematician or not.

Peter is also sceptical about anaphora preserving the justificatory force. At least, with respect to linguistic anaphora, it does not retain the justification of the previous thought. One example would be a transition from supposition to assertion. We suppose that p . And claim that (p) is false.