A Priori Seminar 30/03/18

Attending: Giacomo Melis, Josh Thorpe, Giovanni Merlo, Alisa Mandrigan, Peter Sullivan, Crispin Wright, Paul Conlan, Xintong Wei, Indrek Lõbus, Sam Symons, Ásgeir Matthíasson

Presenting: Ásgeir Mattíasson – his research paper: `Radical Conventionalism'

Truth and Correctness

Carrie asked what the contrast was between 'linguistic truth' and 'genuine truth' (Handout (a)) – whether the former meant truths about language. **Ásgeir** clarified that he meant conventional truth; that is non-descriptive or non-representational. **Crispin** challenged this point by comparing Blackburn's quasi-realism, which seeks to explain away the propositional surface of some truths, while maintaining they are truth-apt through a minimal truth predicate. The Wittgensteinian heritage of Ásgeir's view is to have a disquotational truth predicate, but this would make Ásgeir's view hostage to a non-minimal construal of the truth. **Ásgeir's** claim was that he did not require these linguistic truths to be true (i.e. they are not essentially true), but that there may be some minimal notion of truth associated. His concern was with correctness not truth-conditions, or (to be strict) they are only correct and not true.

From Truth (Correctness) to Necessity

Carrie pointed out that Dummett goes straight to logical necessity (HO, p1, fn. 2), whereas **Ásgeir's** route was to (minimal) truth and not necessity (of any flavour). **Ásgeir's** aim was to try to explain necessity, via a Wittgensteinian account, out of (minimal) truth or (strictly) correctness. We take it as necessary that 2+2=4 as there are no other candidates. **Crispin** worried that this could only provide certainty and not necessity: Ásgeir's story (so far) does not provide sufficient epistemic authority. **Ásgeir** disagreed: if his deployment of convention as constituting the truth of arithmetical statements succeeds, he would have an account of necessity too. **Crispin** queried the examples used by Ásgeir, as they utilise actual world conventions: for example, that one should call back (as in Lewis's example). In these case, there is no counterfactual suggestion, unlike the arithmetical case which is more important for purpose. **Carrie** pointed out that questions of necessity and questions of truth are separated: they can coincide, but one must be explicit about whether that is the case, and provide an explanation for it. The account Ásgeir seems to want is first truth, then necessity, and that there is no coincidence. **Ásgeir** clarified that the thrust of these (actual world) examples was to show that no calling back, for example, is to not play in to the convention. The story is slightly different in the arithmetical case as there is no other option but to according with the conventions; to give the correct answer. This is what gives the arithmetical cases their modal import as opposed to the actual world cases of convention. **Crispin** pushed the point that there is wider scope in the arithmetical case, and so far Ásgeir has an explanatory lacuna regarding conventions. The conventions themselves have to have counterfactual import, else (even in the arithmetical case) it results in a matter of actual world certainty, and not necessity. **Peter** prompted Crispin for a suggestion of the kind of explanation that was required; to which **Crispin** responded the explanandum is the 'deep need' for counterfactual conventions.

Epistemology of Conventions

Ásgeir offered that on a story like Maddy's, (at least) such arithmetical ideas are built in to the concept of a possible world. **Peter** was worried this would make such an account descriptive that arithmetical conventions have conceptual force, but would not do any work explaining what grounds that force.

Modal Profile of Conventions

Crispin pushed the radical conventionalist line on the disanalogy between the conceivable inapplicability of regular conventions, as opposed to the tout court applicability of arithmetical conventions. **Ásgeir** responded that the radical conventionalist line is that such questions are ill formed. **Carrie** worried that this response would make the phone call example lose its analogical force. Something more requires explanation to draw a line between the ill-formedness of questioning the applicability of arithmetical conventions and contingent applicability of regular conventions.

Normativity

Josh questioned the kind of normativity applicable to arithmetical statements, and whether there is a *ceteris paribus* requirement. For example, if one is coerced by a malicious demon to give the 'wrong' answer to a sum on pain of death, is the 'wrong' answer correct on the Radical Conventionalist picture? **Ásgeir** claimed the normativity is derived from arithmetical correctness for certain statements. For the malicious demon, we might say it is ethically correct to give the (arithmetically) 'wrong' answer on pain of death. This brought up a further worry for **Josh**, that it seems as if this route creates some kind of localised correctness, and further that it becomes unclear when one stops doing arithmetic. **Ásgeir** clarified that he intends some holistic element, the idea being that there is no sharp line between what is arithmetical and what is not, but that question can be settled only from within a holistic system. **Peter** wondered whether Ásgeir had to distinguish between the 'true' answer and the 'wrong' answer in cases of coercion. He asked why Ásgeir introduced determinates (such as 'right' answer(s)) if he goes on to exclude all but the correct one? **Crispin** was concerned that the 'ought' in the coercion case is a question of practicality: 'Should I go with the correct answer?' This is not the kind of normativity in question for arithmetic. **Peter** added the further worry of what rules can determine future practice; they can't. Rules (such as the conventions and practices Ásgeir is inclined towards) can only govern evaluation of practices, not the practices themselves. **Crispin** suggested the following picture: some answers are correct and some incorrect. If one introduces a truth-predicate (however minimal) the problem becomes how a statement 'earns' the right to apply the predicate.

Open-Endedness

Josh asked of open-endedness whether it is an actual world concern. **Ásgeir** clarified that the open-endedness of arithmetic is grounded in the technique by which arithmetic is conducted. **Crispin** claimed that the convention of calling back is open ended; it applies to any number of possible (actual world) phone calls. For arithmetic we want more; there is a notion of continuation prescribed by arithmetic. There is an important ambiguity in open-endedness which needs closing: any linguistic practice is open-ended, but there is a special way in which arithmetic is open-ended. For example, the integers are infinite in a way different from the (infinite or finitely many) possible sentences in a linguistic practice governed by recursive construction. **Carrie** pointed out that the language of 'the next number' is misleading: there is no definite 'the next number,' there is only the indefinite 'a next number.' With regards to open-endedness, this requires careful phrasing. **Ásgeir** clarified his position as: numbers are generated by a technique, but there are always alternative techniques. There is no determinate answer to what number there is for 'a next number.'

Conventions, Rules, or Techniques?

Paul was concerned by how sharp the distinction is between rules and techniques. **Ásgeir** clarified he was understanding rules as something independent of practices: appealing to something like an algorithm is underspecified, as it has no direct application. **Peter** pointed out that techniques can equally be abstracta. He called on the Wittgensteinian distinction between machine as symbol and machine as concrete: a way of acting. **Ásgeir** clarified he meant the latter, and was understanding technique as something in which you can be trained. **Sam** wondered whether there was any distinction, for the Radical Conventionalist, between genuinely doing arithmetic and wrote learning? One can learn the cells of a times table without understanding the arithmetic behind the answers. Is the algorithm not independent of how it is realised in the hardware? **Ásgeir** replied that there is no standard to evaluate what the correct answer is, other than the machine to which we are appealing. As such, there is no distinction, for the Radical Conventionalist, between 'genuine' and rote learning.

Normativity Revisited

Xintong queried Ásgeir's idea of normativity: is it just that there is a standard of correctness? If this is so, there is then a gap between Ásgeir's and standard understandings of normativity. It seems as if many who work on normativity might claim Ásgeir's account is, in fact, anti-normative. **Ásgeir** referenced Wikforss and other anti-normative proponents as inspirations.

Crispin suggested there is a tactical error (immediately) tying normativity to 'ought' and 'should'. Ásgeir's intention for using these terms was to connect the conventional to questions of practice: 'what should I do in this situation?' **Carrie** then asked what it was that means one decides to engage in (the norms of) arithmetic and not schmarithmetic? **Ásgeir** suggested there would be some bottoming out at practicality: what is it that's useful and helps us in navigating the world. **Carrie** pointed out this begins to sound somewhat Carnapian: there seem to then be practically good frameworks. **Crispin** reminded us that the conventions under consideration need to have counterfactual import, and not just concern actual world practice.

Correctness and Perspectives

Carrie wondered what was the salient notion of correctness. **Ásgeir** suggested the metaphor that we won't know until we get there. **Peter** rephrased this in Wittgensteinian terms as something which we cannot say from outside the language game (of arithmetic) and cannot say from inside either (until 'we get there'). **Ásgeir** clarified this by saying we cannot determine what is correct until each step is taken (for example in the case of 'a next number'), but since the steps are so small it is determinate [at each step what a next number would be]. **Josh** objected that this requires stepping outside the language game while making this claim. He asked Ásgeir to clarify what the difference maker is between the language game perspective and the perspective outside the language game, even though Ásgeir does not want to say there is an extra-language game perspective. **Crispin** worried about this line, saying if there is no external perspective, from where are we standing when we evaluate the framework? **Carrie** rearticulated this as a general problem of 'pseudo'-realist positions (i.e. those which wish to reclaim something like truth-functionality for properly anti-real statements and the like): from which position does one make claims about the system as a whole? **Ásgeir** claimed he had a route away from this as the claims could take the form of statements about conventions, but **Paul** worried how it is we make sense of the conventions as *conventions* if there is no extra-language game perspective. **Carrie** pointed out that part of what it is for us to understand conventions (for example in driving) is for us to realise they could be otherwise. **Crispin** suggested that physical changes can explain arithmetical dissonance: for example, having a rock taken away from a pile of four and someone saying the number has not changed.

Correctness and Normativity

Carrie referred back to earlier worries about normativity. How can it be that conventions, once adopted, determine the correct answers? **Ásgeir** responded that conventions are made by equilibria, which can only be given once the convention is already in place. **Sam** wondered what this means for making sense of the genus of novel domains (of, say, mathematics); in these cases there appears to be no established equilibria. **Ásgeir** claimed that the (explanatory) route leads from the underlying logic used to generate those novel domains. **Peter** suggested that 'alternative' (as in 'alternative geometries') is playing some double duty. 'No alternative' could mean that there are mutually exclusive commitments, as with different geometries for example. Or, 'no alternative' could mean there is nothing like the world which could fulfil the role that arithmetical concepts play for us. **Ásgeir** played with the idea of what if the world behaved like raindrops, and sometimes 1 + 1 did equal 1.

Semantic Particularism

Carrie wondered about semantic particularism. It seems to reject that something determines future usage (of a term). How does that square with the idea of a convention. **Ásgeir** referred to again to Lewis: what determines the next step is that we agree the next step is equilibrious. **Giovanni** raised that this merely provides an account of what guarantees there is a correct answer. He rephrased Carrie's question as: maybe you can't have that kind of guarantee given the commitments of semantic particularism? **Carrie** suggested that maybe the general/particular dichotomy was not on point, and instead Ásgeir should use internal/external. **Crispin** agreed, saying the arithmetical cases under consideration differ from the ethical aetiology of general/particular. **Ásgeir** suggested maybe the problem lay instead with a distinction between a weak and strong sense of determination.