

**Attending:** Giacomo Melis, Philip Ebert, Crispin Wright, Aesgir Matthiasson, Indrek Lobus, Moritz Baron, Paul Conlan, Fiona Doherty, Giovanni Merlo, Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa, Sonia Roca Royes, Peter Sullivan, Jose

**Presenting:** Giacomo Melis

**Texts:** Boghossian *What is Inference*, Broome *Comments on Boghossian*

### **Initial Remarks**

- **Indrek** wondered whether deductive *reasoning* and deductive *inference* are, for the purposes of the investigation, taken to be the same – constructing a counter model for some premises and concluding the opposite would seem to be some deductive reasoning, but might not be deductive inference. **Giacomo** replied that Boghossian's main interest is in the notion of *inference*, transitions in thought (perhaps making a judgement on the basis of some premises). **Indrek** further wondered about cases where we reason from hypotheses which are never more than hypotheses. **Crispin** pointed out that this is the very objection he has made and answered on Boghossian's behalf – see footnote 1 of Boghossian's paper.

### **The Doxastic Construal**

- **Jonathan** wondered why the discussion is centred on 'following from', and (FFNC) (p.6) is construed in terms of support. If the objection is about what kind of concepts unsophisticated agents have, then the idea that they don't think about what follows from what is a different idea than the idea that they don't think of what supports what. Further, (FFNC) is given in terms of mental states not simply contents. **Giacomo** suggested that the Meta-rain example engages with this problem.
- **Jonathan** wondered what Giacomo intended by higher order – a common construal of higher order is that the belief refers to other beliefs. **Giacomo** agreed with this, but the thought might be about first order thoughts without explicitly mentioning them.
- **Crispin** suggested that it is not clear that the notion we are trying to explain is the notion of a background condition. **Giovanni** suggested there are two questions – what is the notion of a background condition and what is the nature of an inference to be based on some judgement? Boghossian does not give reason to think we could not define background belief independently of basing. **Jonathan** suggested that the grounds on which we would hold a conditional belief like this are going to be very like the inference in question. Very often conditionals of this form are going to be supported by the inference and Boghossian's proposal seems to get the order of explanation backwards – this leads to inference leading

us to believe conditionals rather than the opposite. **Giovanni** suggested that perhaps this sort of if-then condition are generalisations. **Jonathan** suggested that universal generalisations are suppositional in the same way. **Crispin** suggested that there are cases where we can take our premises to support our conclusion and be unwilling to assert the conditional 'if premises, then conclusion'. **Giovanni** suggested that **Crispin's** suggestion is that any account of basing should also be an account of partial basing. **Jonathan** suggested that this depends on how one takes the conditional – if one takes a Lewisian or Stalnakerian approach to the conditional, then accepting the premises and the conclusion will suffice.

### Accounts Which Do Not Appeal to an Occurrent Mental State

- **Peter** suggested that Boghossian's proposal in the counterfactual case it is not clear how causation figures in the response-dependence of the agent. An objection to the counterfactual proposal is that a subject could believe  $p$  on no basis but when pressed for their reasons for  $p$ , the interlocutor's pressing leads the subject to discover reasons to believe that  $p$ .
- **Crispin** wondered why the taking condition is still included in the rule-following construal. If rule-following necessarily involves taking, then the account is circular, and if it does not then why include it. **Fiona** reminded us that this is Broome's point. **Jonathan** suggested that the idea of an akratic agent could drive a wedge between the taking condition and rule-following accounts of inference. **Peter** suggested that there are two complaints on the table – firstly that taking is built into rule following so rule following does not explain taking, and secondly that rule following should replace taking in construal of inference.
- **Peter** suggested that the kind of inference that rule following requires is a practical inference, not a theoretical one. There is nothing in the inferential account that amounts to commitment to the rule in question. There is no serious treatment of what it is to internalise a rule. **Crispin** wondered what it would be to trigger a rule – is it simply fulfilling the antecedent of a conditional? **Giovanni** suggested that for the problem to arise then the notion of inference (theoretical inference?) we are discussing must be the very same sort of inference involved in rule following, and it is not clear that this is the case. **Fiona** suggested that if there is any inference involved at all there is trouble, because we must be able to distinguish the case where the subject (in the email rule) infers what they should do from the email rule, and acts from the case where the subject replies to the email for a reason unrelated to the rule.

Paul Boghossian, “What is inference?”; John Broome, “Comments on Boghossian”, *Philosophical Studies* (2014), 169: 1-25

SET-UP (§§ 1-5)

**Goal of the paper:** investigate the nature of inference, understood as reasoning with beliefs along the lines of Harman 1986. The focus is on *theoretical* reasoning that is conscious and voluntary (reasoning System 1.5 and up).

**Toy example:** (Rain)

On waking up one morning I recall that:

(1) It rained last night.

I combine this with my knowledge that

(2) If it rained last night, then the streets are wet.  
to conclude:

(3) The streets are wet.

What is it for me to infer (3) from (1) and (2)?”

**Link with epistemic grounds:** (1), (2) serve as the reasons (grounds), and epistemic basis, for belief in (3).

**Main desiderata:** explain (i) how reasoning is more than causation; and (ii) how reasoning is something that we do, rather than something that happens to us. Boghossian thinks that the desiderata will be met only if the account of inference satisfies the following:

(*Taking Condition*): Inferring necessarily involves the thinker *taking* his premises to support his conclusion and drawing his conclusion *because* of that fact.

On top of helping to meet the two desiderata above, the taking condition is supposed to give a way of distinguishing between inductive and deductive inferences (§ 4), and a way of accounting for the sense of impossibility that some putative inferences carry with them (§ 5).

ACCOUNTS THAT APPEAL TO SOME OCCURRENT INTENTIONAL STATE (§§ 6-7)

**Doxastic Construal:** “the Taking Condition requires that a thinker have a *meta-belief* about the relation between his premise judgments and his conclusion”.

(Meta-Rain): (3) follows from (1) and (2).

**Main objection:** the account predicts that agents with unsophisticated conceptual skills—agents who lack <premise>, <conclusion>, <follows from>—cannot engage in reasoning.

**Possible reply.** No need for belief in a higher-order proposition; taking requires only that the agent has the following first-order belief:

(FORB) If **it rained last night** and **if it rained last night, then the streets are wet**, then, **the streets are wet**. *Not obvious to me that this is purely first-order.*

*Counter-reply:* FORB cannot be a hidden premise (on pain of regress), so it has to be a background condition on which the conclusion is not based. Understanding the notion of a background condition requires distinguishing it from the notion of a premise on which the judgment is based; but that is exactly the notion we're trying to explain. Thus, the proposal ends up begging the question.

**Intuitional Construal:** we have an intellectual seeming that the conclusion is related to the premises in the relevant way. (9)

Boghossian takes the proposal to amount to the suggestion that one has the intuition that FORB above is true. He suggests that such proposal cannot non-circularly explain what justifies the agent to infer (3) from (1) and (2): one would have to infer that the 1-2-3 pattern is valid from FORB. (9)

*Not all accounts of intuition would require that: one may be taken to intuit the link between premises and conclusion without having to state it in a propositional form and use it to infer that the pattern is valid. In any case, I take it that Boghossian himself has changed his mind on this.*

#### ACCOUNTS THAT DON'T GENERALLY APPEAL TO AN OCCURRENT MENTAL STATE (§§ 8-12)

**The Counterfactual Proposal:** the Taking Condition is accounted by the suggestion that, if asked why she believes the conclusion of (Rain), the agent would offer premises (1) and (2) as reasons for it. (10)

*Objections:* (i) it demands an unreasonable degree of sophistication on the agent's part, and (ii) it makes the property of being an inference, a response-dependent property.

**The rule-following proposal.** "We can capture the notion of inference by thinking of our thought transitions as *guided by inference rules*". (11) The proposal is taken to have the following advantages:

- (a) It accounts for the active aspect of inferences: it's something we do.
- (b) It accommodates the Taking Condition.
- (c) Captures the fact that our inferential abilities are both *general* and *productive*.
- (d) It reflects the way in which we find hard to say why exactly the conclusion is justified by the premises (we similarly find it hard to say what rules govern thought).

*Main question:* how can we distinguish cases in which I follow a rule (I'm guided by it) from cases where I just happened to act in conformity with it?

**Rule-following proposal: the Intentional View.** To follow the rule, one has to act because of the rule; to act because of a rule, one needs to be in an intentional state that represents the rule. But...

my actively applying a rule can only be understood as a matter of my grasping what the rule requires, forming a view to the effect that its trigger conditions are satisfied, and drawing the conclusion that I must now perform the act required by its consequent. In other words, on the Intentional view of rule-following, rule-following requires inference. (13)

**Rule-following without intentional states: dispositions.** *Broad idea:* To follow a rule is to be disposed to conform to it under ideal conditions. (14)

*Objection:* the proposal doesn't play the required explanatory role.

if all we mean by a thinker's applying the rule MP to the contents (1) and (2) is that the thinker is disposed, when considering such contents, to form the conclusion (3), we have clearly lost any prospect of respecting the Taking Condition through the deployment of the notion of following a rule. This will just look like regular causation of some thoughts by others, without the element of taking that Frege rightly saw to be essential to inference. (15)

**Applying a rule as sub-personal.** *Broad idea:* "while there is a rule-encoding intentional state involved in following a rule, such a state is not consciously accessible to the thinker and is not something that he consults in figuring out what follows from the contents he believes."

*Objection:* either the proposal has to appeal to some sub-personal inference between the identification of the trigger-condition of the rule and the judgment that one has to act in accordance with it (making the proposal circular again), or it proceeds entirely at the causal level, and it fails to account for the Taking Condition. (15-16)

#### BROOME'S COMMENTS

**On theoretical vs instrumental reasoning.** Broome (19-20) argues that the Taking Condition may hold only for theoretical reasoning, not for instrumental reasoning. In instrumental reasoning one takes the *intention* of achieving an end to support the intention of taking the relevant means; in theoretical reasoning one takes the *content* of the premises to support the content of the conclusion. If that's right, a *general* account of reasoning should not include the taking condition.

*Supposing that the Taking Condition is in good standing for theoretical reasoning, wouldn't a version of it—one operating on intentions rather than contents—apply to practical inferences too?*

#### **On dispositional accounts of rule-following:**

*Reconstruction of Boghossian's objection.* To explain reasoning in terms of rule-following, we need some rule following which does not involve reasoning itself. There must be some blind rule-following or, in the present approach, some 'blind disposition'.

I think Boghossian's worry is that the working of a blind disposition will be mere causation. But if we pay attention to the way that even a blind disposition to follow a rule works, we will see it amounts to more than mere causation. (21)

Boghossian's point is taken to be the one inspired by Kripke and Wittgenstein: "if the disposition justified you, there would be no difference between your action's seeming right and its being right." (21)

#### *Broome's reply*

Distinguish two notions of rightness. **Weak rightness:** correctly following a rule; and **Strong rightness:** correctly following a correct rule.

To distinguish reasoning from causation we need to focus on weak rightness (the correctness of reasoning is irrelevant to distinguish reasoning from causation). So, the objection to dispositional accounts now becomes that that whatever is going to seem weakly right to you is weakly right:

Even if that were true, it would not follow that acting according to a mere disposition is automatically right, because it may not seem right... Suppose you are asked to pick a number at random, and supposed you are disposed by your psychological state to pick 125. If you act according to this disposition, your choice of 125 will not seem right to you—at least not in the way in which it would seem right if you were answering the question ‘67 + 58?’ (21)

The upshot is taken to be that following a rule is not acting in accordance with a disposition simpliciter, but it’s acting in accordance with a disposition, *and* for that way of acting to seem right to the agent. (21)

**Seeming right:** an act seeming right is an attitude that has a double content consisting of the act and a particular rule. The attitude either consists in, or is manifested by, a complex disposition. It is not a feeling or a phenomenal state, though it may be associated with one. Crucially, it essentially involves recognizing the possibility of correction (which is itself a disposition to stop having the attitude in certain circumstances). By contrast, acting without following a rule does not involve any possibility of correction.

“Because seeming right recognizes the possibility of correction, Wittgenstein is wrong to say that whatever is going to seem right is right.” (23)

### **Being right:**

For an act to be weakly right relative to a rule is for you to have a settled disposition for it to seem right relative to the rule. By this I mean that, were you to check several times, the act would generally seem right relative to the rule. (23)

Two ways of going wrong in reasoning: One can follow a rule incorrectly, and thus fail to be even weakly right. But one can follow a rule correctly and thus be weakly right (when one has a settled disposition for the relevant act to seem right relatively to the rule), and yet be mistaken, i.e. fail to be strongly right (that happens when the rule in question is an incorrect one).

*Can there not be cases of agents who have a settled disposition with respect to the correctness of an act relative to a given rule, and yet be mistaken? (That is, their settled disposition, their seeming right, is misleading). Take Boghossian’s Email Rule: one might have a wrong settled disposition to judge that a given email does call for an answer, and then go on to answer it immediately. The account seem committed to saying that such agents count as correctly following a rule: they have a settled disposition after all. Yet, by hypothesis they were wrong. If such scenario is coherent, a version of the Wittgensteinian objection may be reinstated. Instead of “whatever is going to seem right, is right”, we would have “whatever act one has a settled disposition towards, is (weakly) right”.*

### **Reasoning and normativity**

Broome concludes by opposing the common idea that normative thoughts are necessary for reasoning. By ‘normative’ he doesn’t mean just ‘corresponding to a standard of correctness’ (which matches the notion of being weakly right), but rather ‘pertaining to reasons or oughts’, which he takes to match the notion of being strongly right. Any rule sets up a standard of correctness, but only some rules establish oughts: “Just because there is a rule, that does not mean you have any reason to follow it.” (24)

The distinction Broome is invoking is, in the theory of action and normativity, the one between normative and explanatory (or motivating) reasons. Broome thinks that, despite the fact that Boghossian claims to be working with explanatory reasons, his use of the expression “take to be a reason” leads him to suggest that normative reasons are necessarily involved in reasoning:

when you take something to be a reason for acting, and you act because you do, ‘reason’ has its normative sense. Karen takes the fact that the potion contains cadmium to be a reason for drinking it, and that is why she drinks it. She must take it to be a normative reason, because otherwise it would not explain her drinking. So when Boghossian says that following a rule involves taking something to be a reason, he is using ‘reason’ in its normative sense despite himself. (25)

That’s because

You cannot take something to be a reason unless you know what it is for something to be a reason. Yet that piece of normative knowledge is not required simply for you to be able to follow a rule. In particular, it is not required if you are to be able to do reasoning. (25)

*I suspect that this goes back to the suggestion that the Taking Condition is not necessary for instrumental reasoning, and hence not necessary for reasoning in general.*