

KBNS A Priori Seminar

2019.1.29

Attending: Fiona, Giovanni, Indrek, Jose, Crispin, Peter, Asgeir, Mo, Xintong, Sonia, Carrie, Jonathan

Readings:

1. Wright, "Comment on Paul Boghossian, "What is Inference""
2. Hlobil, "Against Boghossian, Wright and Broome on inference"

Presenting: Indrek

Indrek wondered about whether Boghossian's account can accommodate 'backward reasoning', e.g., when someone constructing a proof by building up from the conclusion or when looking for reasons why a given proposition might be true. Peter commented that since on Boghossian's account what matters is that S takes the conclusion to support the premises, the order of reasoning is not important.

Fiona asked about how premise-discharging inference works on (inferring*). **Crispin** replied that in a conditional proof, although the premises in that proof are not the ones that one accepts, the conclusion is still based on some assumption. So Premise-discharging does not eliminate the role of a premise in inference.

On Crispin's reading, the Taking Condition involves *a registration state*—a state that registers the obtaining of a support relation between premises and a conclusion. Crispin argues that either the content is specific or general, and either way there is a problem of regress. **Indrek** wondered about whether there is a third possibility, e.g., the content of the registration state might be specific but concerns a specific *form* of transition, rather than a specific transition. For example, one might make inference with meta-variable, that seems to concern a form, but a specific form. Crispin replied that when one reasons with meta-variable, there is no specific inference involved, the registration state is about the general form.

Giovanni asked whether a registration state with general content could be 'idle' in the sense that one would recognize that a particular instance falls under the inference rule but does nothing, e.g., does not thereby think that he/she should infer q from p. **Crispin** replied that the idea is that, if the content of a registration state is general, for a transition of thought from q to p to be an instance of inference, the registration state must be such that it must control the movement of thought from p to q, without issuing an inferential license.

Peter asked about for exactly what reason registration state is required for inference? If the need is to meet a rational restraint, namely the representation of the inference rule encoded in the registration state is not merely causal, then it seems obvious that it wouldn't do the work because there has to be some further registration state in place to prevent the registration state being connected with the transition of thought in a deviant way, and so on so forth. **Crispin** replied that this is exactly why we should drop the Taking Condition.

Concerning A-A as a constitutive norm of rational action, **Carrie** wondered whether this claim is too strong, for it seems we can at least coherently describe an akratic action. Although a person who consistently acts akratically is very odd, it is not inconceivable. Imagine an artist who is engaged in some conceptual art project to live her life with no rational guidance and her motivations cannot be formulated in reasons. **Peter** replied that although artists might engage in some odd project, routinely, in much of the life, artists live like us. If for much of the life, Carrie's artist routinely acts akratically, it does seem utterly inconceivable. Wouldn't that artist

fetch her brush when she wants to paint? **Fiona** added that depression might be another counter-example. When someone is depressed, one does have beliefs and desires but one does not act on them. **Carrie** agreed that depression is an interesting case because depressed people don't usually act in ways that make sense to other people. But in response, perhaps there is room to argue that depressed people are not rational.

Peter asked how the intended conclusion about inference comes out the thought of constitutive norm of rationality. The constitutive link is widely accepted by many philosophers such as Ramsey and Davidson, but it seems too general to account for what it takes for the transition of thought from p to q to be an inference. Even if acting on your desires and beliefs is constitutive of rationality, the question whether one is acting *because of* those desires and beliefs in a given case remains. **Crispin** replied that the default is to say that when someone exhibits a pattern of behaviour consistent with the norm, it is rational. Suppose that you ask someone, 'why are you going to the kitchen?', and the person replies that 'I want a beer'. That explanation is complete. The person's beliefs and desires are reasons for his action. His action is not mediated by a further policing state such that he accepts that those beliefs and desires are reasons for his action. Likewise, accepting modus ponens is not necessary for one to make an inference. **Peter** replied that so inference is not an instance but an analogy of A-A. **Giovanni** asked what's the price to pay if we do think inference is an instance of A-A. **Peter** replied that if it is an instance of A-A, then reasoning always includes desires, e.g., truth is desired by all rational agents. **Crispin** emphasized that A-A is a constraint on the description of what we are doing, rather than some rule that we follow. Crispin thought believing has an essential connection to inferential disposition. There is a real difficulty to make sense of bad inference/action, which is primitive and can't be explained in terms of rationalization. There is a temptation to appeal to something like the Taking Condition to explain the bad cases.

Discussions on Hlobil's (IMP): It is either impossible or seriously irrational to infer P from Q and to judge, at the same time, that the inference from Q to P is not a good inference.

Crispin thought that the taking condition supplies the datum and explains (IMP) not the other way around. The inference commits you to the Taking Condition, and the Taking Condition is incompatible with the judgment that the inference is bad, hence the tension in (IMP) **Peter** thought (IMP) does not strike him as apparently Moorean. **Jonathan** added that (IMP) seems false because it is possible to have a justified belief that the inference is not a good inference, e.g., because of misleading evidence, yet inferring correctly. A person can do the morally right things while mistakenly believing that the actions are morally wrong. It is not only possible, but may also be rational.

HANDOUT, AK Seminar, 29.01.18: Responses to Boghossian by Wright and Hlobil

Indrek Lobus

Wright, "Comment on Paul Boghossian, "What is Inference"

1. Inference as a kind of judgment

B's account of inferring: For S to infer from p to q is for S to judge that q because S takes the (presumed truth of) p to provide support for q .

B's account fails to include cases of suppositional and premise-discharging inference:

- In suppositional inference, one does not come to judge the conclusion true.
- In premise-discharging inference, there are no premises whose presumed truth one takes to provide support for the conclusion.

Modification of B's account: S's inferring from p to q is for S to **accept** q because S takes the (accepted truth of) p to provide (contextual) support for (acceptance of) q .

- Supposition is context-confined acceptance. The conclusion from suppositions is mandated in the same context in which the premises are accepted.
- Premise-discharging does not eliminate the role of a premise. In conditional proofs, the conclusion rests on a judgment that its consequent follows from its antecedent.

[*Note: Against the causal constraint:* It seems possible that one infers from p to q but thinks q first and then thinks p —e.g. when constructing a proof by building up from the conclusion or when looking for reasons why a given proposition might be true. The direction of one's train of thought need not match the direction of one's inference. Since future thoughts cannot cause past thoughts, it seems that causal links are not essential to inferring.¹]

2. The Regress (against the Taking Condition)

The Taking Condition in B's account of inference requires *a registration state*—a state that registers the obtaining of a support relation between premises and a conclusion. And the causal condition in B's account requires that the registration state must *control* the subject's movement in thought from the premises to the conclusion.

Question: What kind of content is to be carried by the registration state?

Dilemma: The content of the registration state is either *general* or *specific*.

- If the content is general, then the control it exerts in particular cases must be mediated by an **inference** from it to specific transitions. But if the content is specific, then it must be **inferred** from a general content, since our inferential capacities are *finite but open-ended*.
- Either way, inference turns out to presuppose another inference. Thus, the Taking Condition leads to a regress.

¹ "There may be phenomenological commonalities in particular examples—the occurrence of an orderly series of thoughts, perhaps, with something of a sense of sequential discipline of some kind—but that hardly seems essential." (29)

A way out? There is a way for content-bearing states to exert control in line with their contents without any processing of their contents. **Response:** This control would involve a rational transition that is not subject to the Taking Condition. Inference itself could be such a transition.

[*Note: Another way out?* The content of the registration state is specific but concerns a specific *form* of transition, rather than a specific transition. Our inferential capacities can still be open-ended, since the very same form is present in all transitions of that form.]

3. Inference as rational action

Given that we drop the Taking Condition, what distinguishes inference from a mere sequence of thoughts?

1. The Counterfactual proposal: A transition from a set of beliefs to another belief is an inference when the thinker regards the former as justifying the latter, as providing reasons for the latter.

- Regards: Were the thinker to be asked why he accepts the putative conclusion, he would offer the premises as his reasons.

B's objection: This makes inference-hood response-dependent. But inference essentially involves causation, and causation cannot be response-dependent.

2. The Simple proposal: Whether a transition is an inference depends not on what the thinker would *offer* as his reasons but on what his reasons *actually are*.

- S infers q from $p_1 \dots p_n$ when S accepts each of $p_1 \dots p_n$, moves to accept q , and does so for the reason that he accepts $p_1 \dots p_n$.
- S's acceptance of $p_1 \dots p_n$ must be a *complete* explanation S's acceptance of q .

New question: What is it for certain intentional states of a thinker to be his actual reasons for his transition to another intentional state? Analogous question about **rational action:** What is it to act on certain specific reasons and no others?

- No analogue of the Taking Condition is required for rational action in general. Although beliefs and desires provide reasons for action, a subject need not *judge* or be in any way aware that her beliefs and desires provide a good reason for doing something.

Rational action is constrained by **the norm of Anti-Akrasia:**

(A-A) Provided there is no overriding reason not to, do that which you believe will satisfy your desires.

A-A constrains rational action, but not in the sense that agents are required to have an intention to follow A-A. Rather, A-A is *constitutive* of rational action.

- “A tendency to action upon beliefs and desires in a manner they rationally explain enters primitively into the conditions for *having* the appropriate beliefs and desires in the first place” (35). Compliance with A-A makes it “*possible* to have aims and act on them.” (35)

Why? If A-A was *followed*, it would be conceivable that one has beliefs and desires but no intention to conform to A-A. One would then routinely fail to act on one’s beliefs and desires and instead acted in ways that cannot be made sense of in light of them. This is not conceivable.

- Unlike rule-following, A-A does not allow for an unlimited degree of performance errors.

Inference as a form of rational action: The role of *inference rules* in inference may be understood on the model of the role of A-A in rational action. “[J]ust as movement in accordance with A-A is constitutive of rational action, so movement [in thought] in accordance with **basic rules of inference** is constitutive of rational thought” (36).

- Just as rational action does not require registration of A-A, inference does not require registration of inference rules.
- Conformity to inference rules sets a standard for the possession of acceptances among which they mandate movement. [Does conformity to inference rules make it possible to accept propositions *as such* or does not make it possible to accept propositions *as premises and a conclusion* in a given inference?]
- **Objection to Broome and Boghossian:** Inference cannot be understood in terms of dispositions to rational acceptance or in terms of rule-following. Dispositions allow for irregular patterns of manifestation, and rule-following allows for unlimited degree of performance-errors. If inference rules are constitutive norms, they require regular patterns of movement in thought.

[Notes: 1) If inference is a kind of rational action, then A-A cannot be a norm for all rational action. Otherwise, there would be an instance of A-A specific to inference, and inferences would consequently be rationalized by beliefs and desires, rather than (or in addition to) acceptances of premises.

2) A-A requires a kind of registration state, namely a belief that the action mandated satisfies one's desire. Inference rules do not require such states. Is this disanalogy between A-A and inference rules problematic?]

Hlobil, "Against Boghossian, Wright and Broome on inference"

A good account of inferring ought to explain the *Inferential Moorean Phenomenon*:

(IMP) It is either impossible or seriously irrational to infer P from Q and to judge, at the same time, that the inference from Q to P is not a good inference.

Question to be addressed: How can a doing (inferring) that seems to have no content be in rational tension with a judgment or a belief?

- The Taking Condition gets its plausibility from the plausibility of (IMP), and an explanation of the truth of (IMP) would give us an explanation of the Taking Condition. Taking is whatever explains why inferring can be in rational tension with judgments in the way indicated by (IMP).

Objection to Wright's account: W's putative explanation of the truth of (IMP): It is irrational or impossible to act for a reason one believes to be bad. **Problem:** This is an analogue of (IMP) for acting-for-a-reason and is left unexplained. We would need an account of what it is to act for a reason. [An account of why beliefs and desires rationalize action?]

[*Note: A possible response to Hlobil's general challenge:* Could the drawing of an inference be seen as a way of meeting the standard for having a belief about the goodness of the inference? That belief would be a registration state, but it would be an *upshot* of inference, rather than a requirement on it. So, no vicious regress would ensue. The drawing of an inference would then generate a rational conflict with a judgment that the inference is not good, thus explaining (IMP).]