

Attending: Crispin Wright, Giacomo Melis, Carrie Ichikawa Jenkins, Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa, Xintong Wei, Jose, Peter Sullivan, Aesgir Matthiasson, Paul Conlan, Indrek Lobus, Giovanni Merlo

Presenting: Peter/Giacomo

Discussion Boghossian Delimiting the boundaries of inference, continued/Brainstorming Session

Boghossian

- **Crispin** suggests that under 2.0 on the handout [of seminar 8], Boghossian should endorse d “S takes the premises to support the conclusion”. This is a fully intellectualised self-conscious process.
- **Giacomo** wondered whether there is a way of drawing a line between e.g. machines and agents: Machines have no power to do otherwise, for example. **Peter** replied that this is all fine, but does not save Boghossian from the strain that the taking condition comes under with regard to responsibility – one would expect on Boghossian’s view that the taking condition and responsibility come together, but does not address the question as to whether the taking condition is in place when we adopt the ‘intentional stance’. **Crispin** wondered how we should understand responsibility here? Is it culpability, for example? **Peter** suggested that without the taking condition, something happens that isn’t as it should be, like indigestion, and one is not to blame for it, but the taking condition involves a reflective attitude toward one’s premises, and one is to blame for the outputs of this attitude.
- **Peter** suggested that perhaps the specific taking condition is the upshot of general inferential dispositions (implicit grasp of rules?), and that is tacit in Boghossian’s sense, but the upshot would not be tacit in the sense that Boghossian suggests.
- **Crispin** wondered why Boghossian is working with examples where the rules are explicit then internalised, as opposed to examples where the rules are tacit from the get go. **Peter** suggested that this hinges on how we are to read condition d in inference 2.0. **Crispin** suggested that there could be a ‘tacitised’ version of d which is present in less intellectualised models.

Brainstorming

- **Jonathan** suggested regarding (vi) on the handout, you might think that inference would give you propositional justification, but this is not trivially true. If we restrict to doxastic justification, it is not clear that transmission is the right term – we are getting a new justified belief. Perhaps we should say ‘inference is a way of extending your store of justified beliefs’
Crispin suggested that the connection between the two conjuncts of (vi) is that in the case of bad inference you don’t get the extension of justified beliefs.
- **Crispin** suggested that the responsibility for inference that Boghossian could be understood in the way freedom is understood by Strawson in *Freedom and Resentment* – to infer responsibly is to be taken to infer responsibly. **Peter** wondered whether the projectivist/deeming gloss one can put on this is actually there. The reactive attitude is separable from the holding of responsibility. **Crispin** suggested that the holding of responsibility would be an unstable position without the reactive attitude. **Carrie** suggested that there are some accounts of psychological and intentional states where these do not come apart, e.g. one can take an intentional stance. **Crispin** notes that the thought is just that Boghossian and the other folks engaged in the debate make some sort of realist assumption, and try to answer the question by investigating what really goes on we infer. But perhaps there is no fact of the matter there, perhaps what changes is the attitude we take to the various transitions. The road gestured at by Crispin would be some sort of anti-realism (similar to Wittgenstein’s view on mathematics?).
- **Giovanni** wondered whether we can distinguish different lines of argument against the taking condition (1) accepting it leads you into trouble, (2) we can show that things we call inference don’t include the taking condition, (3) the taking condition does not deliver what we want – we can imagine accounts of inference in which the inference is e.g. responsible, but not on the back of the taking condition.

KBNS A PRIORI STREAM
BRAINSTORMING SESSION
02/04/2019

The Nature of Inference: State of the Art

1. The question and assumptions shared by parties in the debate

The goal is to provide an account of what it is to infer, where inferring is understood as:

- (i) Something *we do*, not just that happens to us;
- (ii) Something that involves more than causation;
- (iii) Something distinguished from other transitions in thought, like free associations.
- (iv) Something that is a proper object of some normative evaluation (the conclusion is meant to be epistemically dependent on the premises);
- (v) Something that is different from argument. To infer may involve following an argument, but an inference is to be distinguished from argument. An argument is a relation between propositions; an inference is a move from one attitudinal state to another. To use Harman's (1986) terminology, inferring is reasoned change in view.
- (vi) The account we're looking for will have to underwrite the possibility of transmission of justification, and leave room for bad inferences.

(Crispin): I am not sure it is generally shared, but one widespread assumption is that inference should be characterised as a distinctive kind of psychological process. So that the difference between e.g. free association and an inferential transition is to be found in the causes or psychological accompaniments of the movement. A different thought is that a transition's being inferential is a matter of the reactive attitudes—in something like Strawson's sense, — taken to it (by the agent or others or both.) This actually chimes quite well with Boghossian's emphasis on agency and responsibility, though that is not his perspective.

2. Main points of disagreement

- (i) *Is satisfaction of the taking condition necessary for an agent to count as inferring?*

Boghossian and Neta say “yes”; McHugh & Way say ‘no’; Malmgren and Siegel do not explicitly discuss the taking condition but hold view that might entail that the condition does not hold. Broome says that the taking condition holds only for theoretical reasoning. Wright suggests that anti-akratic action provides a model for understanding basic inference without appealing to the taking condition.

- (ii) Relatedly, *can states that the agent has no access to play a justificatory role in inferences?* Critics of the taking condition tend to say ‘yes’:

I argue that subjects can draw inferences in ignorance of the exact factors they are responding to. (Siegel fc: 3)

Sufficiently integrated, inaccessible mental states—with the right direction-of-fit and suitable contents—can confer justification on belief, although they're not themselves justified. (Malmgren 2018: 247)

In general, agents must be able to be sensitive to certain conditions without representing those conditions as obtaining. Our suggestion is that agents can be sensitive to fittingness-preservation in reasoning without representing their reasoning as fittingness-preserving. (McHugh and Way 2018: 180)

...there is no more need for a subject to have beliefs, or other forms of intentional registration, about a basic inference in order for her moving to its conclusion to count as inference than a rational agent needs to have beliefs about A-A[Anti-Akrasia principle], or more specifically

about the sufficiency of her beliefs and desires to rationalise her action, in order for that action to count as action on those beliefs and desires, and to that extent rational. (Wright 2014: 36)

Boghossian feels the pressure of the point, and admits of guidance by implicit states:

How are we to reconcile the fact that I.5 inferences don't seem to involve an explicit aim and an explicit taking state? [...] The answer, of course, is that while they may not involve these things explicitly, they involve them tacitly. (Boghossian 2018: 66)

(iii) And, of course, *how should the taking condition be characterized?*

We might be able to distinguish at least three broad options:

(a) The thinker should intuit, believe, have a disposition to believe or think that C follows from P. As McHugh and Way (2016: 315) put it: "As we understand it, taking is a kind of representing; to take p to support q is to somehow represent p as supporting q." [Boghossian]

(b) The thinker should use C as an epistemic reason for believing P, in the broadest sense of the expression "using an epistemic reason"—i.e. one that includes the externalist reading that would allow unreflective creatures to fall within the remit of the taking condition. Or to put it differently, believing that C on the basis of P must be within the reach of the agent's cognitive abilities. [I can't recall coming across anybody who has characterized Taking in this way, and it may be a poor terminological choice—it risks making it trivially true that the Taking condition holds, and it effects conflates the distinction drawn by McHugh and Way between *treating* p as supporting q, and *taking* p to support q.]

(c) The thinker should not just think (or believe, or intuit) that C follows from P, but understand how or why C follows from P. [from last week's seminar]

(b) and (c), for different reasons, seem to be in keeping with a natural thought about inference: that it should be the *premises themselves*, and not any incidental or external knowledge about them, that provide the inferrer with her reason for believing the conclusion. But, of course, (c) is the most interesting between the two. [From Peter's minutes of last week seminar:]

Option (c) would be a significant change to Boghossian's conception:

(a) 'Understanding how or why' is non-negotiably 'factive': one can't understand how or why P unless P.

(b) In contrast with 'know' and (the unloaded understanding of) 'appreciate', it is at least hard, and perhaps impossible, to find a non-factive version of it that could figure in an account intended to embrace both good and bad inferring.

(E.g., could it really be a condition on inferring, as an *epistemologically* relevant notion, that someone merely 'have the impression of understanding...?') [but advocates of rational intuition or intellectual seemings would have no problem with this: they would put some constraints on what it counts to "have the impression of understanding..."]

(c) So – tentatively – to the extent that this suggested modification is worth pursuing it reinforces the reasons for thinking that *good* inference should be the primary explanandum (See below).

Thus...

(iv) *How to distinguish between good reasoning, bad reasoning, and transitions in thought that do not count as reasoning at all?*

Again, from last week's material:

Reasons *for believing* can be good or bad, so count or not count as reasons *to believe*. But there are limits: one can't, by 'inferring' tomorrow's weather forecast (C) from some arcane fact of Roman history (P), 'establish' that P as one's reason for believing that C. Where do these limits come from?

Intuitively, the limit is the (hazy) limit on what kinds of error are intelligible: mistakes are possible, but for something to count as a *mistake* it must at least be intelligible how a thinker might regard it as not mistaken. In the case in hand: no one could *intelligibly* be thought of as 'inferring' the 'conclusion' C, that it will rain tomorrow, from the 'premise' P, that Nero was given to fiddling at inopportune moments, and thus as believing C *for the reason* that P, given that P is so *patently not* a reason to believe C.

If any such rough account of the 'limits' is right, it suggests:

(α) that an account of *good* inference, or inferring *well*, needs to be given a central place in an account of what inferring (good or bad) amounts to; that one should not aim *first* to explain inferring (good or bad) and *then* explain the good cases as those that satisfy an extra condition.

(β) there is at least a tension between

the aim to explain 'inferring' as a psychological kind – one delimited by reference to the natural causal transitions and dependencies it involves,

and

recognizing that there are broadly normative constraints on whether something can be an instance of that kind.

(v) *What's the relation between basing and inference?*

Supposing that the Taking condition (on reading (a) above) holds, one might think that a belief is inferential when it is clear that is taken to be supported—or to follow, in some sense—from premises that one can individuate. That suggests that all cases of inference involve a basing relation. The other direction doesn't seem to hold though: one might be able to provide reasons for a belief that one now holds, whilst realizing that the belief in question was originally formed on the basis of some other—now forgotten—reasons. In this case, there might be an epistemic basing relation without inference. Consider Peter's example (from p. 3 of handout on Boghossian 2018):

I've no idea how or when or why (e.g.) I first came to believe that Frege thought that incomplete expressions have reference – but I could now give reasons for believing that.)

On the other hand, McHugh and Way (2018: 190) may be taken to suggest that there can be inference without basing as well—more precisely, they say that a belief may be inferential and yet epistemically

basic (it can justify without being itself in need of justification; e.g. some perceptual beliefs). This relates to the next point.

(vi) *What's the relation between 'dynamic' and 'static' basing?*

[From Peter's handout and minutes] 'dynamic', in that it is an occurrence that *establishes* something to be the case; 'static', in that what is thus established then just *is* the case. [This may suggest that the dynamic notion has priority over the static one—the static one would be the result of the occurrence that constitutes the dynamic notion. But see below some reason to think that the static notion may have priority.]

The static relation seems at least to include: (i) causal dependence, as when one state or process causally depends on another, but to exceed that in that (ii) the causal relation is of the 'reason-giving' kind.

Consider a possible reflection on Peter's example above. If we accept that the reasons someone *could* or *would* now *give* for believing something are more relevant than its history to whether and how this belief is inferentially grounded, this shows (a) that the *epistemologically* relevant 'static' relation of basing is one that can obtain independently of being 'established' by an inference once actually performed; and therefore (b) the primary explanandum should be this general, history-independent relation. [Maybe so, but wouldn't a characterization of that history-independent notion require appealing to some general dynamic basing that someone could potentially go through? If so, static basing would be potential dynamic basing. This mirrors the debate on the priority between propositional and doxastic justification.]

(vii) *Are there any differences between theoretical and practical reasoning (apart from the fact that the former concerns reasoning to beliefs, and the latter concerns reasoning to intentions)?*

Broome suggests that the taking condition holds for theoretical but not practical reasoning. Kent pointed out that Broome also says (not sure where) that there is no equivalent of withholding judgment for practical reasoning: withholding on acting just is not acting.

(viii) *what's the lesson of the example of the (putatively impossible, or unwarranted) inference from PA to FLT?*

Other possible readings for the coming weeks

Harman, Gilbert. 2002. A logic is not a theory of reasoning, and a theory of reasoning is not a logic. *Studies in Logic and Practical Reasoning*, pp. 171-186.

Kornblith, Hilary. 2012. Reasoning. *On Reflection*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 2.

Boghossian, Paul. (2016). Reasoning and Reflection: A Reply to Kornblith. *Analysis*, 76(1), 41–54.

Richard, Mark. (forthcoming). Is Reasoning a Form of Agency? In Magdalena Balcerak Jackson and Brendan Balcerak Jackson (eds.), *Reasoning: Essays on Theoretical and Practical Thinking*. Oxford University Press.

Schechter, Joshua. (forthcoming). Small Steps and Great Leaps in Thought: The Epistemology of Basic Deductive Rules. In Magdalena Balcerak Jackson and Brendan Balcerak Jackson (eds.), *Reasoning: Essays on Theoretical and Practical Thinking*. Oxford University Press.

Broome. John. (forthcoming). A Linking Belief is not Essential for Reasoning. In Magdalena Balcerak Jackson and Brendan Balcerak Jackson (eds.), *Reasoning: Essays on Theoretical and Practical Thinking*. Oxford University Press.

McHugh C. and Wat J. Forthcoming. What is good reasoning? *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.