6.5

APRIORITY

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Introduction

What Is Apriority?

Apriority characterizes a way our beliefs acquire justification. Justification acquired purely in this way is apriori justification, as opposed to empirical (also called "aposteriori") justification. Apriority then derivatively applies to knowledge or to propositions when apriori justification is or could be had, respectively. In English, philosophers today may use either the single or double words, "apriori" or "a priori," sometimes italicizing "*a priori*" to indicate use of the original Latin.

When does a belief have apriori justification? The traditional answer is: when its epistemic justification is purely acquired independently of experience. However, that gloss stands in need of several refinements, and there is no consensus as to how to make them. First, what is *epistemic* justification? Roughly, it's justification had when a person's belief is *likely* from her perspective to be true. It's unclear, though, how to fully explicate the relevant notion of likelihood in noncircular terms. Second, what counts as experience here? Perceptual experience, the hallmark of empirical justification, certainly counts, but whether, for instance, introspection or other modes of self-reflection should also count is unclear. Finally, and perhaps most famously, no beliefs, much less justified ones, can be had *totally* independently of experience. As Kant famously put it, "how else should the cognitive faculty be awakened into exercise if not through objects that stimulate our senses and in part themselves produce representations . . . ?" (Kant (1781/1998): B1) A belief's apriori justification must somehow hold not *in virtue of* any experiences, even if some experiences are causal prerequisites.

Many important philosophers, especially in recent history, have questioned whether the notion of apriori justification is coherent, has theoretical utility, or has interesting scope (Quine (1951); Devitt (1998); Harman (2003); Stalnaker (2003); Williamson (2008).). These challenges shouldn't be dismissed, but this won't be where we face up to them. I'll assume we have a working grasp of a coherent notion of the apriori and can rely on a working hypothesis that it is theoretically sound. Any investigation into the apriori proceeds with a hope to refine and a willingness to revise our initial assumptions.

What is a discussion of a patently epistemological notion doing in a volume on the philosophy of language? The basic idea of an intimate connection between apriority and *analyticity* is centuries old. In the last twenty or so years, though, an interesting connection has been seen between apriority and *conceptual role semantics*. After introducing a little more context, my main aim will be to critically examine that latter connection.

The Traditional Scope of the Apriori

Apriority has been alleged to characterize propositions across a diverse range of topics. A sample of such topics includes: morality, color relations, metaphysical modality, axioms of recently developed formal theories such as set theory and probability theory, and philosophy itself. Controversial as the notion of apriority itself already is, its application to any particular one of these topics is yet a further controversy. However, *if* the notion of apriority is in good standing, then there are two core topics to which it most uncontroversially applies: *mathematics* and *logic*. If these topics aren't apriori, apriority is of little interest.

All of mathematics is generally taken to be apriori, but the propositions whose apriority is most discussed tend to be claims of arithmetic, in particular the most elementary of such truths. Consider your justification for believing that every number has a successor. This isn't something you plausibly know on the basis of any perceptual experience. This is a paradigmatic example of apriori justification.

Within logic broadly understood, we need to distinguish two areas of apriority. First, we have apriori justification for believing formal *meta*logical laws. For example, we're justified in believing in the validity of Modus Ponens, i.e. in the claim that every argument of the form *p*, *if p then q, therefore q* is truth-preserving. By contrast, there is our apriori justification for believing and inferring logical truths. When you reason your way toward some novel logical truth, reasoning *by* Modus Ponens and other such rules, apriori justification is transmitted from premises to conclusion in each inferential step. In some cases involving zero premises, justification can be generated, not merely transmitted. (An example of a rule that doesn't simply transmit but generates apriori justification might be the rule that licenses belief in the logical truth that either alien life exists or it doesn't.)

This generation and transmission of apriori justification within logical reasoning is of special importance. While it's been argued that our justification in some of these core mathematical, metalogical, and logical areas reduces to our justification in others, the one area where our justification seems *least* susceptible to reduction is this last area of logical reasoning. (For discussion of such reductions, see Dummett (1973), Boghossian (2001), Wright (2001) and Dogramaci (2010) on logical reasoning and metalogical laws, and see Hale and Wright (2001) on mathematics and logic.) For that reason, and because space is limited, in what follows I will primarily focus on apriority in cases where we reason toward the logical consequences of what we know.

Two Main Views of What Explains Apriority

In the contemporary debate, there is something of a competition between two main views about what explains apriori ways of acquiring justification. Though no labels are completely standard, I'll call these *intuition-based views* and *meaning-based views*. The latter views are our focus here, but it will be useful to briefly talk about intuition-based views. The ultimate evaluation of meaning-based views largely comes down to how their net plausibility compares with that of intuition-based views.

An intuition-based view aims to explain the apriori way a person acquires justification by appealing to intuitions she has, a kind of mental state modeled on perceptual experience. Such a quasi-perceptual state of intuition was perhaps most famously invoked by Descartes, in the notorious form of clear and distinct perception. Intuition-based

views have, in the last twenty years or so, again come into fashion (BonJour (1998); Huemer (2007); Sosa (2007); Bengson (2010); Chudnoff (forthcoming); Bealer (2000) is a hybrid intuition- and meaning-based view); at the same time, naturally, criticism of intuition-based views has also seen a rise (e.g. Weinberg et al. (2001)).

Perhaps the most attractive prospect that intuition-based theories hold is that of a fully general and unified explanatory theory of epistemic justification: as perceptual experiences explain empirical justification, intuitions explain apriori justification. To secure this advantage though, the intuition-theorist cannot construe intuitions as anything too obscure (such as clear and distinct perception). Intuitions should be a kind of mental state that's very similar to perceptual experiences. As such, many contemporary theorists (e.g. Bealer, Huemer, Chudnoff) construe intuitions merely as *seemings,* the mental state you're in whenever something seems to you to be the case. On such views, just as your belief that blood is red is justified by its visually seeming that blood is red, your belief that either aliens exist or they don't is justified by its seeming so, not perceptually but merely "intellectually".

Two major challenges shape the current debate over intuition-based views. One of these concerns how intuitions help explain *inferential* justification. Even if we suppose an intuition justifies belief in a metalogical claim that, say, a certain form of inference is valid, there's a question about whether that could explain how justification gets transmitted across beliefs in an inference. The worry is inspired by a famous dialogue by Lewis Carroll (Carroll (1895)). Carroll's cryptic dialogue appears to raise a worry that, if inferential justification involves knowledge of validity, then some kind of infinite regress ensues. In a recent sequence of articles, Paul Boghossian has reinvented the challenge not as a threat of regress, but as a charge that knowledge of validity is simply explanatorily redundant when it comes to explaining certain cases of inferential justification. I *already know* the conditional *if p then, q*; it adds nothing explanatorily significant for me to have an *intuition* that (necessarily) *if: p and if p then q, then: q.* (Boghossian (2001); Boghossian (2003). Wright (2001) critically examines Boghossian's challenge.)

The other challenge to intuition-based views can be posed in the form of a dilemma. On the one hand, intuitions had better not be anything supernatural; it's not plausible that any faculty of rational insight puts us in, say, causal touch with some heavenly realm of mathematics or logic. This pressures us toward a nonexotic construal of intuitions, something like mere seemings. On the other hand, if intuitions are constituted just by a seeming, an internal mental state that anyone could have at anytime, then what reason is there to think intuitions are *reliable*? We can tell a plausible causal story about how perceptual experiences are reliable, but a causal story will not do for intuitions. The challenge here was first posed by Benacerraf (1973), and later sharpened by Field (1989) as follows: if you think there is no explanation of how your beliefs about some topic are reliable, then you are rationally obliged to give those beliefs up.

Meaning-based views of apriority enter the debate advertising themselves as especially well suited to explain both reliability and inferential justification. What, then, is a meaning-based view?

The starting point or background premise of any meaning-based view is some form of conceptual role semantics, henceforth "CRS." Different meaning-based theorists accept different forms of CRS. The weakest thesis common to all meaning-based views is that a person's disposition to engage in certain patterns of reasoning is a necessary condition on her understanding certain meanings or grasping certain concepts. Note, this is stronger than just a claim about what's required to have representational states or even

to have beliefs: the claim is about what's required to have states with certain contents, contents involving particular concepts. Note, though, that the claim is weaker than the common *reductive* forms of CRS: meaning-based theorists needn't accept that there are non-intentionally describable dispositions constituting our intentional mental states. (Boghossian and Peacocke, prominent defenders of meaning-based views, have both rejected reductive forms of CRS (Boghossian (1989); Peacocke (1998)). For an extensive critique of CRS in all forms, see Williamson (2008).)

Now, a conceptual role semantics of any kind for any of our words or concepts is controversial. CRS is perhaps on firmest ground, when it comes to our understanding of logical constants. It certainly seems impossible that a subject fully understands the standard logical connectives while lacking any disposition to draw the inferences governed by certain canonical rules. For example, suppose we want to know whether this linguistic (or mental) symbol in a person's language (of thought), •, expresses the concept of *conjunction*. An extremely intuitive necessary (even sufficient) condition on that is that she is disposed to infer $p \bullet q$ from the pair of beliefs p and q, and is disposed to infer p, and to infer q, from the belief $p \bullet q$. Similarly, anyone who systematically refused to infer q from the pair of beliefs p and $p * q$ would not plausibly mean the conditional by that connective.

(Could someone grasp a concept, by having a disposition that she never exercises? We can allow for such a bizarre possibility. The person succeeds in understanding $p * q$ as a conditional, because if she *were* also to believe p and to consider whether q, she *would* infer q. Since she never gets the opportunity to learn p, she never makes the inference. This reasoner might even be perfectly rational, though she might not get to form as many beliefs as she'd like.)

Supposing a CRS for logical concepts is roughly right, then meaning-based views may begin to look attractive. What we notice is an apparent *coincidence*, literally speaking, between the inferences crucial to understanding logical connectives and the inferences that transmit justification in an apriori way. But we shouldn't rush to conclusions. CRS itself has no immediate epistemological implications.

The claim of interest, and the claim that defines something as a meaning-based view, is that the conditions on understanding a meaning or grasping a concept somehow *explain* the apriori way that beliefs acquire justification. What, then, is the explanatory link from CRS to justification supposed to be? And, how does the link address the challenges that faced intuition-based views? We'll now look at the leading contemporary proposals, and the problems those proposals face.

Meaning-based Explanations of Reliable Inference

Connecting Meaning and Reliable Inference

Each of the leading contemporary advocates of meaning-based views, namely Peacocke, Boghossian, Bealer, and Hale and Wright, have, at one time or another, endorsed the following powerful claim: When a disposition to engage in certain reasoning is essential to understanding meaning, this secures that reasoning's reliability. To see what can be said in defense of this claim, we have to step back from the issue of apriority for a moment.

Supposing CRS for the logical connectives is roughly right, there is a question that arises before we even bring up apriority at all. What explains the connection between certain inferences and certain concepts? In other words, why are *these* inferences crucial

to grasping conjunction; why are *those* inferences crucial to grasping the conditional? There must be some general theory dictating how concepts get paired with their associated conceptual roles.

A clue to answering that question emerges when we consider certain defective conceptual roles. Prior (1960) concocted the following famous pair of inference rules, alleging they define a connective he dubbed *tonk*: from p, infer p-tonk-q; and from p-tonk-q, infer q. Prior's intent was to (light-heartedly) mock the claim of a connection between an inference's reliability and its being essential to understanding the meaning of a connective; *tonk's* inferences, far from being reliable, lead to any absurdity. But a different and very plausible moral was drawn, first by Belnap (1962) and by many others since, namely that there simply is no genuine logical operation identified by the connective *tonk*; *tonk* is simply meaningless. That, in turn, suggested there must be substantial constraints on when an inference is essential to understanding a meaning, at least one of those constraints being that the inferences are *truth-preserving*. A truth-preservation constraint would also begin to explain the pairings between the standard logical connectives and their canonical inferences: Those connectives each make their associated inferences truth-preserving. For example, if • expressed disjunction or the conditional, rather than conjunction, then the inference to p (or to q) from p • q would be highly unreliable.

If the general theory dictating which conceptual roles pair with which concepts does include such a constraint, then the meaning-based theorist is a step closer to explaining how apriority ensures reliability. The full explanation isn't in hand yet, since we still need the part of the explanation that says *why* non-truth-preserving inferences cannot occur in the conceptual roles essential to understanding meanings. If we leave it a pure coincidence that those inferences are truth-preserving, then the position looks no better than that of the intuition-theorist who simply asserts a coincidence between intuitions and truths. The Benacerraf–Field challenge to our ability to rationally maintain our beliefs in this area would remain.

Now, there is a plausible idea the meaning-based theorists can draw on to explain the connection between meaning and reliability. The idea is that in coming to understand the meaning of a new word or grasp a new concept, we *implicitly stipulate* that this word/concept expresses *whatever semantic value makes certain inferences truth-preserving*. For example, we may fix the meaning of • as conjunction, in part, by implicitly stipulating that • expresses whatever truth-function makes certain inferences truth-preserving (namely, the canonical inferences for conjunction mentioned earlier). The inference rules for *tonk* then don't help to fix any meaning, because the relevant stipulation cannot be fulfilled.

Much more must be said, of course, to fully develop and defend this sort of strategy for connecting meaning and reliability. Christopher Peacocke has done extensive work on this project, engaging with it in many influential works (including Peacocke (1993); Peacocke (2000); Peacocke (2004)). Boghossian (1996), Bealer (2000), and Hale and Wright (2001) also defend the strategy, though all in different ways. Against all these views, Paul Horwich argues that stipulations of truth cannot in any way explain how we understand meanings, nor can facts about meaning-constitution secure the reliability of our inferences (Horwich (2005): chapter 6).

The outcome of this debate is important: it decides whether meaning-based views really are in a superior position to address the Benacerraf–Field challenge. However, even if that challenge were put to rest, there remain serious doubts about whether a

meaning-reliability connection could explain everything we need to explain about apriority. I turn to those doubts now.

Doubts about Whether a Meaning-Reliability Connection Fully Explains Apriority

Apriority, the thing we want a theory to explain, is a way of acquiring epistemic *justification*. Now, some philosophers, so-called "reliabilists," hold the view that the one and only way for a belief to acquire epistemic justification just is that it be the product of a reliable belief-forming process. But, that view is highly controversial, and in any case, all of the leading meaning-based theorists explicitly reject it. Two of them, though, Peacocke and Bealer, do claim that a *guarantee* of reliability would explain apriori justification. Here is Peacocke's position:

> According to the metasemantic theory [Peacocke's theory], in using an a priori way of coming to judge that *p* a thinker is using a method which guarantees, as a result of the very nature of *p* and the way in which its truth-condition is determined, that the thinker judges that *p* only if it is the case that *p*. When the soundness of a method is thus internally related to what it is for the content to be true, it is hard to see what more could be required for knowledge. Such a constitutive grounding of the soundness of the method goes far beyond merely reliabilist conditions for knowledge. (Peacocke (2004): 173)

(The view is also put forward in Peacocke (1993): 190; Peacocke (2000): 265. For a similar view, see Bealer (2000): 7–10. Bealer doesn't demand a guarantee, only a "strong modal tie between [a method's] deliverances and the truth" (p.9). For brevity, I'll stick to using "guarantee", but the following comments apply equally if we substitute "strong modal tie").

In the passage, Peacocke mentions conditions for knowledge, but I want to set knowledge aside and focus on the weaker condition of being epistemically justified. Should we agree with the suggestion that if a way of forming a belief is guaranteed to be reliable, that *explains why* it is epistemically justified? I don't know any simple objection that would compel a staunch advocate like Peacocke or Bealer to concede this isn't a sufficient condition for both knowledge and justification. However, when they offer the condition as an *explanatory* one, as they do, their view does face pressure: there are two heavy burdens the view has to shed before it can be seen as part of the best overall explanatory theory of justification.

The first burden is as follows. We want the best overall explanation of epistemic justification. The best explanations are highly general. So, we prefer to give a single explanation that covers *all* epistemic justification, apriori and empirical. But, a standard counterexample to reliabilism seems to show that empirically justified beliefs need not be the product of any reliable process. It seems possible that a brain-in-a-vat, which is fed a stream of misleading perceptual experiences indiscernible from some nonenvatted person's, can form completely justified beliefs. So, whatever explains why her beliefs are justified, it seems to not be that they are the product of a reliable process, much less a process guaranteed to be reliable. So, if we pursue a meaning-based view that explains apriori justification via a guarantee of reliability, then it seems we will have to settle for a disjunctive explanatory theory: we'll have to settle for a theory that says one thing

explains empirical justification, while a completely different thing explains apriori justification. Thus, the first heavy burden on pursuing such a view is to say why, contrary to how it just now seemed, we're not pursuing an explanatory theory that's less than best.

The second burden has been pressed by Boghossian. He draws on the other standard counterexample to reliabilism: it seems that an unwittingly reliable clairvoyant would not be justified in believing the deliverances of her faculty of clairvoyance. Boghossian (2003) suggests there can be reliable inferences that are essential to understanding some meanings, but which are as wildly irresponsible as the clairvoyant's beliefs. To illustrate this, he claims that there could be a concept, the concept *flurg,* such that fully understanding *flurg* requires *immediately* inferring from the arithmetical axioms that some numbers are flurg, and then from that *immediately* inferring Fermat's Last Theorem. (Here we're *referring* to this concept without *using* it ourselves.) This pair of immediate inferences leading to Fermat's theorem obviously doesn't transmit justification. The burden on the position in question, then, is to say why the inferences don't transmit justification in the same way the inference from $p\&q$ to p does. The only apparent way of doing this is to deny that there is any genuine concept which can only be fully grasped by making that wild leap to Fermat's theorem. So, the effective burden is to say why there is no such concept. That burden is difficult to shed, because the proposed inferences for *flurg* are truth-preserving; indeed, as an arithmetical theorem, Fermat's theorem is an apriori proposition. So, *flurg* cannot be dismissed as easily as *tonk* can be. We could add new constraints to our general theory linking concepts and conceptual roles, but it's unclear how to avoid introducing ad hoc constraints (i.e. the constraints cannot be motivated by the fact that they handle *flurg)*.

These burdens certainly aren't the last word on whether a meaning-based view can explain justification by appealing to a guarantee of reliability (as the presentation of them as burdens, rather than refutations, was designed to emphasize). But this much pressure motivates us now to examine a meaning-based route to explaining epistemic justification that purports to do better.

Meaning-based Explanations of Epistemic Responsibility

Blind-Yet-Blameless Inference

How can the meaning-based theorist explain how beliefs are epistemically justified without drawing on the connection between meaning and reliability? The starting point of Boghossian's explanation is as follows. Even if apriori ways of acquiring justification are reliable, the unwittingly reliable clairvoyant shows that even when beliefs are reliably formed something can go wrong that leaves them unjustified. Boghossian suggests that what went wrong in the clairvoyant's case is that, in forming her beliefs in the way she did, she was being *irresponsible*. Boghossian's guiding idea, then, is that if we can explain why a thinker is being responsible when forming her beliefs in certain ways rather than others, then we will have explained why those are ways of acquiring justification. And that does seem plausible: The targeted notion of epistemic justification does seem to be tied to a kind of responsibility, which we can call *epistemic responsibility*. At a very minimum, epistemic responsibility is one philosophically worthwhile notion to aim to explain.

A simplistic approach to understanding epistemically responsible belief formation would be to explicate it as belief formation that the believer knows or somehow recognizes to be reliable. This would be one understandably natural initial reaction to the case

of the clairvoyant. Intuitively, the clairvoyant shouldn't have formed her beliefs *blindly* ("blindly" meaning "without any clue as to whether they were formed reliably"). But, Boghossian firmly rejects that approach, and I earlier mentioned his Carrollian argument against it. Perhaps if the clairvoyant knew that her faculty of clairvoyance is reliable, she'd be a responsible believer. But, according to the Carrollian argument, what *explains why* reasoning by *Modus Ponens* is responsible is *not* that I know my inference is reliable.

(To be sure, if I become philosophically reflective and wonder whether reasoning by Modus Ponens is reliable, the only way I can responsibly continue reasoning by Modus Ponens is if I give my question a positive answer. If I give a negative answer, or even if I adopt an agnostic view, then I am responsible for suspending all reasoning by Modus Ponens. But, this doesn't mean that higher-order knowledge of the reliability of reasoning by Modus Ponens *explains* why the reasoning is epistemically responsible. And, of course, it also doesn't mean that the responsible person on the street is required to engage in reflective epistemology in the first place.

There are philosophically interesting problems concerning *how* the reflective thinker could positively settle this higher-order question of Modus Ponens's reliability. Limitations of space prevent me from getting into it here. The classic discussion is Dummett (1973), further developed in Dummett (1991). Dummett argues, and Boghossian and many others have agreed, that we can *use* reasoning by Modus Ponens to infer the conclusion *that* reasoning by Modus Ponens is reliable. This is a so-called rule-circular argument, familiar also from the soundness proofs used in metalogic. I oppose the legitimacy of these rule-circular arguments in Dogramaci (2010).)

In looking around for some better way of explaining epistemic responsibility than an appeal to higher-order knowledge of reliability, Boghossian's next move is to offer the following argument. (He will not ultimately accept the argument, but it leads us to a better one.) Suppose a disposition to draw inferences of a certain form is essential to understanding the meaning of some basic term (or, if you prefer, grasping some basic concept). That term (or concept) would need to be used just to state the reliability claim for the associated form of inference. Therefore, prior to having any disposition to draw those inferences, it is not possible to evaluate the reliability of those very inferential transitions. And now an ought-implies-can style of maneuver comes: when it is not possible to even have the thought that your inference is reliable, it cannot be irresponsible of you to draw that inference blindly. Thus they are blind-yet-blameless inferences.

This *prima facie* appealing argument was endorsed in Boghossian (2001), but he brought it up again in Boghossian (2003) only to decide that it cannot adequately explain apriority. The problem is that if the argument is any good, it applies to all inferences that are essential to understanding a meaning, but then it applies to the irresponsible inferences for understanding *flurg*. So, we need a better argument, one that won't exonerate *flurg's* inferences.

In the last sections of Boghossian (2003), he sketches a path to improving upon the argument for blind-yet-blameless inferences. Here's my elaboration of the key ideas from those last sections.

The clairvoyant was irresponsible, and an appealing explanation is that she's irresponsible because she formed her beliefs blindly when she did not have to. If we're to generalize that explanation, then we need to find some way in which someone reasoning by Modus Ponens must proceed blindly, while someone who draws the inferences essential to understanding *flurg* does *not* have to form her beliefs blindly. Boghossian is going to offer an idea for what that way is.

To get to that idea, he reviews a plausible point that Russell, Ramsey, Carnap, and David Lewis all made about the conceptual roles essential for understanding theoretical terms (and concepts) of science. Any inferences essential to grasping these terms hedge on the existence of a property or entity expressed by the term. Various proposals about how the hedging happens differ in their details, but the basic idea is simple. One illustrative way it might happen is that all the inferences essential to understanding, say, "gravity," must take place under a supposition: first we suppose there is a property of gravity, and only then we say gravity is the property with such-and-such a role. That role might even be the role of being the thing that makes such-and-such a set inferences truth-preserving (again, only supposing there is such a thing). If the conceptual roles are hedged in this way, both sides in a debate over the very *existence* of gravity may fully understand the terms of the debate. Hedging thus seems to be something responsible thinkers must do, at least wherever it is possible.

Boghossian doesn't explicitly put it this way, but we can even say that when inferences are hedged in the right way, they no longer count as blind; rather than being made "without any clue" as to whether they are reliable, they are made under a supposition that they are reliable. Seen in that way, hedging provides the key to understanding why someone who fully understands *flurg* is being irresponsible in just the same way the clairvoyant was. We wanted to say the clairvoyant formed beliefs blindly when she didn't have to. Now, to fully understand *flurg*, you do have to draw certain inferences, and you do have to draw them blindly. But what you don't *have to* do is fully understand *flurg* in the first place. *Flurg* has a sister concept, call it *flurg**, that can serve any legitimate purpose *flurg* could serve but which requires only hedged inferences to be fully understood: first we suppose there exists a property, flurg*, which some numbers have and which makes the transition from axioms to Fermat's theorem valid; then, given the axioms, we immediately infer that some numbers are flurg*, and from that in turn we immediately infer Fermat's theorem. Those inferences, all made under a suitable supposition, aren't blind and certainly aren't irresponsible. Thus, the inferences associated with *flurg* are indeed blind, but they are not blameless: the inferences associated with *flurg**, on the contrary, are *not* blind, and *are* blameless.

Finally, Boghossian claims that there is a minimal stock of concepts which a responsible thinker must be permitted to fully understand without engaging in any hedging. These are the concepts needed before you can hedge anything in the first place. He doesn't say exactly what's in this minimal stock, but he says the concept of the conditional certainly is, probably along with a few more very basic logical concepts. Fully understanding the meaning we actually express using "if" cannot require making any suppositions, since that would require already understanding a conditional thought. Rather, understanding the concept of the conditional requires a disposition to engage in certain reasoning flat out, including reasoning by Modus Ponens. There is no sister concept for the conditional; unhedged inferences are the only option when it comes to these conceptual abilities. Therefore, Boghossian concludes, since the only way to have a concept like this is to be disposed to draw certain inferences blindly, one is not thereby being irresponsible. These, and only these, are the blind-yet-blameless inferences.

Other Recent Views

In a, moment I'll turn to an objection to the above line of argument. First, I want to briefly mention recent work by other authors. The objection I will be raising applies to all these views.

Schechter and Enoch (2006) is primarily a criticism of meaning-based views. However, what Schechter and Enoch take issue with is only the thesis that the nature of epistemic justification can be *fundamentally* explained by any considerations concerning meaning. They take meaning-based theorists like Peacocke and Boghossian to task for false advertising about the role of meaning in the explanation of justification. Meaning-based theorists say that meaning considerations explain why we have justification, but then Peacocke appeals to reliability considerations, while Boghossian tacitly appeals to something like an ought-implies-can principle to supply the fundamental explanation; meaning only comes into the picture to account for why this or that is (guaranteed to be) reliable or (im)possible.

Once Schechter and Enoch turn to their own positive view, which they call *the pragmatic account* they also allow meaning to play that sort of ancillary role. Their view is that what fundamentally explains how our beliefs acquire justification is that we have an *epistemic obligation* to engage in certain cognitive projects, and this justifies the belief-forming methods that must be used if those projects are to succeed. For example, there might be an epistemic obligation to explain the world around you, and this, on their view, is what justifies a rule for, say, inferring the best explanation. They roughly characterize our basic epistemic obligations as obligations to explain, understand, inquire, reason, and deliberate about the world. Meaning comes into the picture because such obligations can only be successfully discharged if we are able to have conditional thoughts, and given CRS, this in turn requires us to draw certain inferences.

(Wright (2004) independently developed an extremely similar pragmatic view at the same time. I'm focusing on Schechter and Enoch (2006) here because Wright (2004) doesn't, at least not explicitly, discuss appealing to CRS.)

Schechter and Enoch even suggest that Boghossian is tacitly presupposing something like their view. They say:

> Indeed, it is plausible that Boghossian's discussion presupposes a version of the pragmatic account. . . . Boghossian claims that . . . [b]elief-forming methods that constitute unconditionalizeable [unhedgeable] concepts are justified . . . because such concepts are needed to conditionalize [hedge], and hence are needed to engage in inquiry. This suggests that on Boghossian's view the justification in all of these cases ultimately springs from the needs of rational inquiry, presumably a rationally required project. (708–9)

Boghossian never explicitly said certain methods are needed *to engage in inquiry,* only that they are needed to start hedging in the way a responsible thinker does. But Schechter and Enoch's suggestion seems a reasonable and fair way of elaborating the complete argument at work.

A line of argument again in the same family is endorsed in Wedgwood (2011). Wedgwood says:

> My current proposal, then, is that what makes the *primitively* rational cognitive processes *a priori* is that they are precisely those processes that we must have some disposition to engage in if we are to possess these basic cognitive capacities [where those capacities include "one's possession of each of the various concepts that one possesses"].

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Here, "primitively rational" means justified, and not in virtue of the thinker's establishing their reliability using other arguments; "*a priori*" of course indicates that the justification is independent of experience. Having said *which* beliefs and inferences involve ways of acquiring apriori justification, Wedgwood then goes on to answer the attendant *why*-question in a way that's by now familiar to us:

> Can anything more be said to make it plausible that it is precisely these capacities that explain why the primitively rational processes are *a priori?* It may be relevant that these capacities seem to be necessary for even *considering* the questions that one actually asks oneself. Clearly, one's possession of the concepts that appear in these questions is a capacity that one must have in order to consider these questions. [All quotes from section 4 of manuscript.]

Wedgwood's overall view, which we're only scratching the surface of, is of course unique in a number of subtle ways; the same goes for Schechter and Enoch's positive view. But it's the common core elements that allow us to usefully group them together with Boghossian's account of blind-yet-blameless inference. And, as I'll now show, there is a single objection that threatens to bring down all these explanations of epistemic justification. (The objection threatens Wright (2004) too, but I cannot argue that here.)

(For a different set of complaints about meaning-based explanations of epistemic responsibility and justification, see Horwich (2005): chapter 6; and Horwich (2008). Since space is limited, I will not review Horwich's points here. I will rather develop an objection that has not been pressed against meaning-based views, though a paragraph in Williamson (2003): 252 anticipates the basic problem I develop.)

A Gap in the Meaning-Based Explanation of Responsibility

There's a familiar distinction, associated with Chomsky (see, e.g., Chomsky (1965)) between competence and performance. Most versions of CRS only say that one must be *competent* at drawing certain conclusions from certain premises in order to understand our ordinary logical concepts. What competence involves exactly is debatable. Maybe it just requires a simple disposition, maybe something more intellectually demanding, like rule-governed thinking, or maybe it's something else entirely. Whatever it requires exactly, on any plausible version of CRS, *performance errors* are perfectly consistent with understanding. After all, it's surely *possible* to affirm the consequent, but doing that requires understanding a conditional. I can still perfectly understand a conditional thought, *if p then q,* even if, say, on some occasion I irresponsibly affirm the consequent, inferring the conclusion p from beliefs in q and in *if p then q.* So, whatever level of understanding ordinary people have, it has to be consistent with such errors.

Now, the epistemologist's task is to explain facts about justification. The things that are justified or unjustified are beliefs, and the things that succeed or fail to transmit justification to beliefs are inferences. All this is on the performance side of the Chomskyan distinction. A cause for worry, now, is that the most that any of the arguments we heard shows is that if you're doing anything that's necessary for understanding basic logical thoughts, then you're being responsible. (You might even be meeting an obligation, as Schechter and Enoch have it.) But then this means what we heard could only explain

why it's responsible (or obligatory) to have *competence* with certain forms of inference. How do the arguments we've heard explain what we originally wanted to explain, the status of performances (their status as responsible, obligatory, justification transmitting, or whatever)?

The worry is not about having competence without ever exercising it. As mentioned early on, perhaps there could be a perfectly rational thinker who never believes *p* and *if p then q,* and so never has the opportunity to reason by Modus Ponens. Rather, the worry is about how the fact that an inference *manifests a responsible competence* should explain why the inference, the *performance,* is *itself* responsible (or obligatory, or justification transmitting, or whatever).

Let me now make the problem more concrete. Suppose, in a moment of weakness, I affirm the consequent. This is an irresponsible inference. If I *had,* in that instance, reasoned by Modus Ponens, then I *would have* made a responsible inference. Now, since affirming the consequent requires that I understand conditional thoughts, I must actually have whatever competence is required for understanding such thoughts. I've committed a performance error, but, I have also done everything necessary for understanding conditionals. But, if that's the actual case, then *it would not have helped enable me to understand conditionals had I reasoned by Modus Ponens;* I already understand conditionals. Therefore, my reasoning in the counterfactual scenario falls outside the class of what the meaning-based theorists argued is responsible. The meaning-based theorists' arguments fail to explain why my (counterfactual) inference is responsible. Furthermore, in a a case where I *actually* reason by Modus Ponens but easily *could have* affirmed the consequent, the meaning-based theorists cannot explain why my actual inference is responsible.

The basic source of the problem is that even if *having a competence* is responsible (obligatory, whatever), that doesn't entail that any *manifestation of that competence* is responsible (obligatory, whatever). Is this claim too strong? Could the meaning-based theorist resist it, perhaps by accusing it of "proving too much"? We might imagine the meaning-based theorist using the following analogy to argue that an explanation of why having a competence is good surely can always extend to explain why any competent performances are good. It's good to have a dust-free home. A dust-free home doesn't require any particular token dusting; it only requires a disposition or a habit of dusting occasionally. But, surely the goodness of a dust-free home explains why it was good that you dusted yesterday afternoon!

But, the analogy isn't apt. Every token dusting makes your home less dusty. Not every token instance of reasoning by Modus Ponens makes you more competent with the concept of the conditional.

Here's a better analogy for the relation between inferences and conceptual competence. Suppose animal overpopulation explains why it's good to issue a hunting license to someone. That explanation will entail that token killings are not all unjustified. However, it will not entail that all killings are justified. Once the population is thinned, there's no explanation left for why the next token killing is good; it's not good. In just the same way, if my competence at inferring *q* from *p* and *if p then q* is secured, then there's no explanation left for why any additional, "extra" inferences are responsible. There's a gap between the explanation of why the competence is good and the explanation of why *all* competent performances are good.

Meaning-based views have sparked a rich and valuable debate that spans nearly all of contemporary philosophy's main branches. As I've aimed to show here, their

viability depends on addressing some serious doubts about the specific proposals so far made, doubts concerning meaning's connections both to reliability and to justification. There's no doubt, however, that meaning-based theorists will continue to offer creative arguments for assigning meaning an important role in the theory of the apriori.

Related Topics

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