Constructing the World

Lecture 3: The Case for A Priori Scrutability

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Plan

1. Sentences vs Propositions
2. Apriority and A Priori Scrutability
3. Argument 1: Suspension of Judgment
4. Argument 2: Reconditionalization
5. Argument 3: Causal and Mediating Roles
6. Objections
What are Truths?

• Scrutability thesis: There is a compact class of truths such that all truths are scrutable from truths in that class.

• Question: What are truths?
  • Propositions?
  • Sentences?
  • Thoughts?
Propositional Scrutability

- Truths = true propositions?
- Trouble: different theories of propositions give different results
Theories of Propositions

- Russellian theory: propositions are composed from objects and properties
- Fregean theory: propositions are composed from Fregean senses
- Possible-worlds theory: propositions are sets of worlds.
Russellian Propositions

• On the Russellian theory: ‘Hesperus is Hesperus’ and ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ express the same proposition

• So we can’t associate them with different epistemological properties.

• If we went this way: An a priori scrutability base will arguably require singular propositions for every individual.
Possible-Worlds Theories

- On the possible-worlds theory: ‘2+2=4’ and Fermat’s Last Theorem (and ‘Hesperus = Phosphorus’?) express the same proposition.

- So we can’t associate them with distinct epistemological properties.

- If we went this way: A scrutability base will arguably require just one proposition (containing our world).
Fregean Theories

• On a Fregean theory, these epistemologically different sentences will express distinct propositions

• So a Fregean theory is better-suited for our epistemological purposes

• But: we can’t just assume a Fregean theory, as grounding a Fregean theory of propositions is one of the project’s purposes.
Sentences

• For our purposes, it’s better to formulate scrutability in terms of sentences:
  • All true sentences are scrutable from true base sentences
  • Or better (because of context-dependence), in terms of sentence tokens, or utterances, or assertions, or sentences in contexts.
  • All true sentence tokens (or true assertions) are scrutable from true base sentences.
Knowing Sentences

- This requires us to appeal to epistemological relations between subjects and sentences (or tokens/utterances/assertions):
  - knowing S, being in a position to know S, believing S, being justified in believing S, ...
- How to make sense of this relation?
Knowing Propositions?

• It’s natural to understanding knowing S as knowing p, where S expresses p.

• This may be OK on a Fregean view of propositions, but on other views, will yield coarse-grained results:
  • e.g. if someone knows ‘H=H’, they know ‘H=P’.

• We need a finer-grained understanding.
Fine-Grained Knowledge

- Claim: Everyone needs a fine-grained way of associating knowledge and belief with assertions, in order to explain phenomena such as

- sincere assertion, knowledgeable assertion, justified assertion, lying, norms of assertion, etc.

- E.g.: Mary knows that the morning star is a planet but believes that the evening star isn’t. Intending to deceive John, she says ‘Hesperus is a planet’.

Thursday, 20 May 2010
Argument from Assertion I

1. Mary’s assertion is not knowledgeable.

2. If the Russellian view is correct, Mary knows the asserted proposition.

3. An assertion is knowledgeable if the speaker knows the asserted proposition.

4. The Russellian view is incorrect.
Argument from Assertion II

1. Mary’s assertion is not knowledgeable.

2. If the Russellian view is correct, Mary knows the asserted proposition.

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3. If the Russellian view is correct, it is not the case that an assertion is knowledgeable if the speaker knows the asserted proposition.
Accounts of Knowing Sentences

• Say that one’s assertion of S is knowledgeable iff one knows S.

• Four views (we can stay somewhat neutral):
  • knowing S = knowing p under the guise under which S expresses p.
  • knowing S = knowing an associated descriptive proposition
  • knowing S = knowing that S is true.
  • knowing S = knowing p, where S expresses p.
Sentences and Thoughts

• The account I’ll use:
  • All nondefective assertions of sentences (or assertive sentence tokens) express thoughts.
  • Thoughts are token occurrent mental states (entertainings) that can constitute belief, knowledge, etc.
  • The expression relation is primitive.
  • It is a priori that an assertion is true iff the thought it expresses is true.
Knowledge of Sentence Tokens

• Then, for an asserted sentence token S: the speaker knows S when S expresses a thought that constitutes knowledge.

• The speaker believes S when S expresses a belief.

• N.B. Even on a Russellian view, ‘H=H’ can express a belief (that p) while ‘H=P’ expresses a thought (that p) that isn’t a belief.
Knowledge of Sentence Types

- For sentence types S: the speaker knows S when the speaker has knowledge expressible by an assertion of S.

- Likewise for belief, etc.

- The relevant sentence types will be context-invariant (or involve primitive indexicals such as ‘I’ and ‘now’).
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Propositional Apriority

• p is known a priori by s iff s knows p with justification independent of experience.

• p is knowable a priori (or: p is a priori) iff it is possible that p is known a priori.
Sentential Apriority

- A sentence token $S$ is known a priori iff $S$ expresses a priori knowledge.
- $S$ is knowable a priori [$S$ is apriori] iff $S$ expresses a thought that is justifiable independently of experience, yielding a priori knowledge.
Apriority

• If one accepts fine-grained Fregean propositions:
  • S is a priori if the proposition expressed by S is knowable a priori?

• If one accepts Russellian propositions and guises
  • S is a priori iff the proposition expressed by S is knowable a priori under the guise of assertion?

• ...

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Features of Apriority

- (1) Mode of presentation sensitivity
  - ‘H=H, …’ is a priori while ‘H=P, …’ is not.

- (2) Idealization
  - Idealizes away from cognitive limitations

- (3) Non-introspectiveness
  - ‘I am thinking’ is not a priori.

- (4) Conclusiveness?
  - A priori certainty, not just a priori knowledge?
A Priori Scrutability

• For all ordinary truths M, M is a priori scrutable from PQI.

• PQI’ ⊃ M is a priori (for sentence types)

• A corresponding thought is a priori (for sentence tokens)
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From Conditional to A Priori Scrutability

• Last time, for all ordinary truths $M$, one is in a position to know (from the armchair) that if $PQI$, then $M$.

• So one can know $PQI \supset M$ from the armchair

• Q: Is the armchair justification in these cases essentially empirical, or not?
Argument 1: From Suspension of Belief

• (1) The conditional belief in M given PQI’ is justified even if one antecedently suspends all empirical beliefs.

• (2) So the conditional belief in M given PQI’ is justified non-empirically.

• (3) So belief in PQI’ ⊃ M is justified a priori
Case for Premises

• Premise 1: the Cosmoscope argument still goes through on suspension of empirical belief. The Cosmoscope provides all the empirical information needed.

• Premise 2: The justifying role of experience is screened off by its role in justifying (e.g. perceptual and introspective) empirical beliefs.
Objection

• Objection: We are fallible about which beliefs are empirical beliefs, and about what it takes to suspend all empirical beliefs.

• Reply: OK, but the argument at least suggests that $PQTI \supset M$ is not justified by any obviously empirical belief.
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Argument 2: From Reconditionalization

1. For all ordinary $M$, one is in a position to know if $PQI'$, then $M$.

2. If one is in a position to know if $PQI'$, then $M$, justified by empirical evidence $E$, one is in a position to know if $PQI'$ and $E$, then $M$ with weaker empirical evidence independent of $E$.

3. For all ordinary truths $M$, there is basic empirical evidence $F$ such that one is in a position to know if $PQI'$ and $F$, then $M$ a priori.

4. Basic empirical evidence is itself a priori scrutable from $PQI$.

5. For all ordinary $M$, $M$ is a priori scrutable from $PQI$. 
Reconditionalization Principle

- Reconditionalization: If a rational agent knows M with justification from E, they can conditionally know M given E with justification independent of E.

- Idea:
  (i) Suspend judgment about E
  (ii) Suppose E for purposes of conditional proof
  (iii) Conclude M
  (iv) Discharge, yielding if E then M.
Strong Reconditionalization

• Conditionalization: If $cr^*(M|E) = \Phi$ at $t_1$, and one acquires total relevant evidence $E$ between $t_1$ and $t_2$, then $cr^*(M) = \Phi$ at $t_2$.

• Strong reconditionalization: If $cr^*(M) = \Phi$ at $t_2$, and one acquires total relevant evidence $E$ between $t_1$ and $t_2$, then $cr^*(M|E) = \Phi$ at $t_1$.

• Counterexamples if $cr^*(M|E)$ is not defined at $t_1$, e.g. if acquiring $E$ enables possession of $E/M$ concepts.
Weak and Synchronic Reconditionalization

- Weak reconditionalization: If cr*(M) = Φ at t₂, and one acquires total relevant evidence E between t₁ and t₂, and cr*(M|E) is defined at t₁, then cr*(M|E) = Φ at t₁.

- Conditionalization entails weak reconditionalization

- Synchronic reconditionalization: If cr*(M) = Φ at t₂, and one acquires total relevant evidence E between t₁ and t₂, and cr*(M|E) is defined at t₂, then cr*(M|E) = Φ at t₂, with justification independent of E.

- Weak reconditionalization strongly suggests synchronic reconditionalization (the key thesis).
Scrutability of Evidence

• Question: Is basic evidence F scrutable from PQI?
  • If our basic evidence concerns phenomenal states of affairs, it is included in Q, so F is scrutable from PQI.
  • If our basic evidence concerns primary/secondary qualities implied by PQI, the same applies.
  • If basic evidence is constrained in form, PQI ∪ F will at least be compact.
Core Knowability

• Core Knowability Thesis: All knowable [non-Fitchian] ordinary truths are knowable via reasoning from core evidence (perceptual evidence about primary/secondary qualities, introspective evidence).

• If so: all noncore [non-Fitchian] evidence can be known via reasoning from core evidence, and so is scrutable from core evidence (and from PQI).

• Fitchian obstacles to knowability from core evidence are not obstacles to scrutability from core evidence.

• So all knowable truths are a priori scrutable from PQI and core evidence, and so from PQI.
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Argument 3: Enabling and Mediating Roles

• Empirical factors E may well play a enabling role in the acquisition of concepts in M, and thereby in knowledge of if PQTI then M.

• Empirical factors can also play a mediating role: one infers from PQTI to E to M.

• Many putative justifying roles for empirical factors are better seen as enabling or mediating roles.
Generalized Scrutability

• Generalized conditional scrutability: The truth-value of M is conditionally scrutable not just from PQTI but from many other PQTI*.

• When an empirical factor E plays a mediating role: E will play its role only when E is conditionally scrutable from PQTI*.

• When E plays an enabling role: E will play its role even when ~E is conditionally scrutable from PQTI*.
Diagnostic

• Consider cases where \( \neg E \) (and \( M \)) is conditionally scrutable from \( \text{PQTI}^* \). Does \( E \) play the same role in knowledge of \( \text{PQTI}^* \rightarrow M \) as in knowledge of \( \text{PQTI} \rightarrow M \)?

• If yes: \( E \) plays an enabling role, not a justifying role (knowledge can’t be grounded in a falsehood).

• If no: \( E \) probably plays a mediating role (otherwise we have a nonuniformity in justifying factors).

• Opponent needs to deny generalized conditional scrutability from \( \text{PQTI} \)-sentences in these cases.
The Role of Simplicity

• E.g. Block and Stalnaker (1999) our armchair knowledge of PQTI → M is justified by empirical knowledge that the world is simple.

• But in these cases, it appears that the truth-value of M is scrutable from PQTI-like sentences even if those specify non-simple scenarios. Does simplicity plays its role in these cases?

• If yes: enabling role. If no: mediating role.
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Objections

- Objection from conceptual change
- Objection from imperfect self-knowledge
- Objection from self-observation
- Objection from acquaintance