

MLE Seminar, 28/04/09
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A Theory of the A Priori George Bealer

Overall goal: to show that a notion of the a priori is acceptable (even if the notion of analyticity is suspect). Approached through the topic of evidence (reasons). Will argue that we can and must use intuitions as evidence, and that such intuitions have a 'qualified modal tie' to the truth.

Section 1

Intuitions *are* used as evidence in standard justificatory practices in logic, philosophy, etc.

An account of intuition:

- Intuition is not mysterious inner power or faculty – to have an intuition that A is just for it to seem to you that A – 'seeming' being a genuine conscious episode.
- The seeming is intellectual and on the basis of reason; we can gain it by reflection.
- Rational/a priori intuitions present themselves as necessary, c.f. physical intuitions.
- Not like a belief: that is not a seeming; may believe something without an intuition.
- Not infallible, as seen by various paradoxes; but they are 'on-balance consistent'
- Intuitions are not as plastic as beliefs: you can't get a person to intuit just anything.
- 'One more primitive propositional attitude': not a judgment, for example

A (non-intuitive) argument to establish not just that intuitions are used as evidence, but *are* evidence: the 'self-defeat' argument: omitting intuitions from your body of evidence leads to self-defeat: it will lead to an epistemology that is not justified on its own terms:

Quineans hold these three principles:

1. Principle of empiricism: phenomenal experiences/observations comprise a person's evidence
 2. Principle of holism: a theory is justified for a person if it is/belongs to the simplest comprehensive theory that explains all/most of their evidence
 3. Principle of naturalism: natural sciences (+logic/maths) constitute this simplest theory
- So follows that a theory is only justified if it belongs to the natural sciences. Quineans hold we only need elementary logic; no modal propositions found in the formulation. So no modal proposition is justified. (Similar argument for definitions, analyticities, etc).

The self-defeat argument (reductio of the principle of empiricism):

- Principles 1-3 contain words like 'justified', 'simplest', 'theory', 'explain', 'evidence'
- These terms don't belong to primitive vocabulary of the simplest formulation of the natural sciences; nor can they be *defined* within it
- So the principles can't be justified, by their own lights

To avoid the self-defeat, we ought to replace 1 with:

1'. Principle of moderate rationalism: a person's phenomenal experiences & intuitions comprise their basic evidence

If we are engaging in epistemology, hence need to avoid self-defeat, the inclusion of intuitions as part of evidence is rationally unavoidable.

Section 2

Looking for a truth-based/reliabilist explanation of why intuitions are evidence.

Something is a basic source of evidence iff it has an appropriate reliable tie to the truth.

Is this a contingent (nomological/causal) tie or a necessary one?

- Contingent: vulnerable to clairvoyant-type counter-egs.
- Modal: need to find the weakest natural modal tie that does the job. As with phenomenal experience.

Infallibilism is too strong; need a fallibilistic modal tie with the following characteristics:

- 1) It holds relative to some suitably good cognitive conditions
- 2) It is holistic
- 3) It holds “for the most part”

We may not always fulfil (1), but with suitably elementary propositions we approximate it.

This analysis is common to intuition and phenomenal experience – it qualifies them as basic sources of evidence.

Section 3

So why should there be this kind of tie? Turn to the theory of concept possession.

Two ways in which a subject can be said to possess a concept:

- Nominal: subject has natural propositional attitudes towards propositions which have that concept as conceptual content. Compatible with misunderstanding/incomplete understanding, or with having propositional attitudes by attribution of third parties.
- Full, strong sense: not compatible with such possibilities. Understanding a concept, or possessing it determinately.

It is possible for the central concepts of the a priori disciplines to be understood by some cognitive agent or other.

Explicating determinate concept possession:

- Multigon example: a woman introduces a new concept for a closed plane figure of several sides, but never applies it to triangles or rectangles. Her intuition would be that such shapes are multigons. If a multigon had to be five sides or more, it would be that they aren't. If her intuitions were wrong, she either wouldn't determinately possess the concept or her cognitive conditions would not be normal
- Chromic example: shades of phenomenal colour, withheld from white and black. Then experiences grey for the first time. Will depend on whether a property of being chromic is also being non-grey. The woman determinately possesses the concept before she encounters grey, despite not having intuitions about it or even being able to entertain questions regarding it. No requirement that you have already had the experiential resource for determining the concept's extension to possess it determinately.
- Chromic example variant: nomologically impossible for the woman to experience grey. 'Chromic' could still express a definite concept. But there is still a metaphysical possibility that the woman could experience grey, and then she would have the same intuitions as in the original case.

So maybe we can explicate determine concept possession in terms of the metaphysical possibility of relevant truth-tracking intuitions. Determinateness constitutes the categorical basis of this possibility. Quantity and quality of intuitions improve when a person's concept possession shifts to determinateness.

A possible analysis of determinate concept possession:

- X determinately possesses a given concept iff, for associated test property-identities p: x would have intuitions which imply that p is true iff p is true; so
- Determinateness is the mode m of understanding such that, necessarily, for all x and property-identities p which x understands m-ly, p is true iff x would have intuitions which imply that p is true
- Objection: this relies on the subjunctive 'would'

Replace with modal notion: a priori stability:

A person x can settle that a property-identity p which x understands m-ly is true with a priori stability iff for some stipulated cognitive conditions and conceptual repertory:

- (1) X attempts to elicit intuitions bearing on p; these, given theoretical systematization, affirm its truth (whilst x understands p m-ly)
- (2) Necessarily, for any greater level of cognitive conditions and/or larger conceptual repertory, if X attempts to elicit intuitions bearing on p, they will, given theoretical systematization, affirm its truth

So

- Determinateness is the mode m of understanding such that, necessarily, for all x and property-identities p which x understands m-ly, p is true iff it is possible for x to settle with a priori stability that p is true

But this conflicts with scientific essentialism, since there are property-identities that are essentially a posteriori (e.g. water = H₂O)

- So the 'only if' part of the 'iff' biconditional must be weakened.
- We don't have a priori intuitions supporting such identities, but we do have 'twin earth' intuitions, e.g.: if corresponding samples to earth water are not H₂O on twin earth, they're not really water
- So we should be able to tell a priori whether there is at least a true counterpart of the property-identity

So:

- Determinateness is the mode m of understanding such that, necessarily, for all x and property-identities p understood m-ly by x:
 - i) p is true if it is possible for x to settle with a priori stability that p is true
 - ii) p is true only if it is possible to settle with a priori stability that p has a counterpart which is true

(Some propositions which are 'semantically stable' such that any relevant counterparts of p are identical to p. In this case the last modification is not necessary. This is the case for most of the central propositions in the 'a priori disciplines').

But now this seems to allow in too much:

- A person could possess only the categorical content of the concepts 'beech' and 'elm' but be unable to distinguish the two; we wouldn't want to say this person possessed the concepts determinately. The 'web of belief' is too sparse.
- If x were to absorb more true beliefs about beeches and elms x's incomplete understanding would eventually shift to determinate understanding. Someone who already had determinate understanding wouldn't undergo any kind of switch.

So add that:

- iii) For all true propositions p which x understands in mode m and could believe, it is possible for x to believe p whilst still understanding it in mode m

So determinate concept-possession guarantees the tie of our intuitions to the truth, as it guarantees a tie between phenomenal experience and the truth.

Conclusion

Suggests a qualified autonomy for the a priori disciplines from empirical science. Their questions could be answered, as a metaphysical possibility, without relying substantively on the latter. Might require higher faculties, but we can approximate it.

Two lines of argument for the autonomy thesis:

- The argument from evidence: possibility of intuitions with a necessary tie to the truth is the possibility of autonomy. Scientific essentialism only holds for semantically unstable terms.
- The argument from concepts: possibility of determinate possession of the central concepts of the a priori disciplines is the possibility of autonomy

Does the analysis of determinate concept possession also accommodate (what would have traditionally been called) synthetic propositions?

- Property-identities not restricted to analytic truths; also, e.g., that being an equilateral triangle = being an equiangular triangle, etc. It's just the proof of such identities that requires synthetic axioms.

Concerns/queries

1. Intuition, for Bealer, is a seeming. On what basis do we *get* such seemings? Through our concept-possession, presumably. But think about a substantive philosophical issue, like the question of personal identity. There could be two different concepts (not just conceptions) of identity and we're looking for a way to arbitrate as to which *really* captures who we are. Furthermore, that's the sort of thing we have intuitions about (intuitions which just follow from concepts are pretty boring). Same with intuitions in ethics, epistemology, etc. Ethics doesn't just want to ask what counts as right on various different concepts of 'right'; it wants to ask what the correct concept of right *is*. Epistemology doesn't just want to use what counts as knowledge on various different concepts of 'knowledge'; it wants to know what the correct concept of knowledge *is*. Are *these* intuitions given reliability by Bealer's theory, or do they go out the window? (You might say these different concepts *are* just different 'conceptions'. But that won't be any better for Bealer's argument, since the general concept will underdetermine which conception we want). Even if it's not the analytic/synthetic distinction, there is an asymmetry between these kinds of questions and the ones Bealer addresses himself to, and the idea that these are just more 'complicated' and would require better cognitive conditions is questionable.
2. (Relatedly:) It's important for Bealer's argument that you could possess a concept determinately without having determined its extension. But his 'chromic' example seems less definitive than he presents it as being. I'm not clear on whether, if one had never encountered grey, there could be a definitive fact of the matter as to whether one's concept of chromic even *had* that extension. It seems to be something I would have to decide upon encountering grey, stipulatively rather than through the extension of my prior concept.
3. Does the argument actually function as an explanation of why intuitions in general are reliable? It tells us that in the cases where we possess concepts determinately, our intuitions are by definition reliable. But then the question becomes how we can know that we possess any given concept determinately, or that some proposition is true with a priori stability in possible worlds where our cognitive capacities etc are enhanced...