Phil. 252: Norms of Belief
Nov. 8, 2017

Meeting 10: Do Self-Fulfilling Beliefs Refute Evidentialism?

I. Last Thoughts on Interactionist Pragmatism

view #4 (inspired by Schroeder 2015): It is *never* the case that I have a strong epistemic reason to believe P, an equally strong epistemic reason to disbelieve P, and no other epistemic reasons that bear on the matter. This is because the following is true:

> *Schroeder's Posit*: Whenever a subject's epistemic reasons to believe P are equally balanced with her epistemic reasons to disbelieve P, then in virtue of that she has an epistemic reason to suspend judgment on P.

Since epistemic reasons for belief do not exhibit prohibitive balancing but rather combine in exactly the same manner as practical reasons for belief, it is no mystery how the two types of reasons interact with one another to yield all-things-considered overall verdicts.

worry #1: In fact, we need something stronger than Schroeder's Posit to obtain the right verdicts about cases of equally strong epistemic reasons to believe and to disbelieve. What we need is:

> *Schroeder's Strengthened Posit*: Whenever a subject's epistemic reasons to believe P are equally balanced with her epistemic reasons to disbelieve P, then in virtue of that she has an epistemic reason to suspend judgment on P *that is greater in strength than either her epistemic reason to believe P or her epistemic reason to disbelieve P*.

I find it very mysterious why Schroeder's Strengthened Posit would be true.

worry #2: In either version of Schroeder's Posit, the epistemic reason to suspend judgment counts as a *derivative reason*. But it is standard to hold that when comparing reasons to determine overall verdicts, we should never weigh *a derivative reason* against *a reason from which it was derived*, lest we double-count.

worry #3: This Schroederian view faces the same bizarre consequences about cases (i), (ii), and (iii) as the double-weighing version of Reisner's view does.

II. Extending the Combinatorial Argument to Austere Pragmatism

Austere pragmatists reject the existence of epistemic reasons for belief, so they must deny the UCC.

However, we are very strongly inclined to hold the UCC to be true, so austere pragmatists owe us an error theory for this inclination on our part (especially if they argue for their view on abductive grounds).

> *a natural error theory*: Although evidence is not itself a direct source of reasons for belief, we almost always have a strong practical reason to form our beliefs and other doxastic attitudes in accordance with the overall balance of our evidence, because it is generally useful to do so.
>
> But we mistakenly think that *pro tanto* evidence is a direct source of epistemic reasons for belief. So we confuse the (true) claim that *pro tanto* evidence obeys prohibitive balancing with the (false) claim that evidence is a direct source of reasons that obey prohibitive balancing.

The central problem with this error theory: it is a notational variant of the amended version of Reisner's view (the double-weighing proposal).

Thus it yields the same bizarre consequences about (versions of) cases (i), (ii), and (iii).

In fact, almost any austere-pragmatist error theory for the UCC can be "reverse engineered" into an interactionist combinatorial function. So if all such combinatorial functions are implausible/ad hoc, so too are all such error theories.

III. The Numbers Game

Reisner proposes a thought experiment that he takes to refute the following thesis:

> *evidentialism about reasons for belief*: All normative reasons for and against belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment are grounded in evidence.

Reisner's thought experiment involves *auto-alethic belief*, i.e. a belief "that secures its own truth" ("Pragmatic Reasons for Belief," p. 15).

> Similar cases have recently been used to argue for epistemic permissivism (Jonathan Drake, Matthew Kopec, Thomas Raleigh) and to argue that non-evidential considerations can be motivating reasons for belief (Nathaniel Sharadin).

Here is the thought experiment:

> *the many-fixed-points numbers game*: Alice is attached to a computer that can read her doxastic states with perfect accuracy and reliability. In front of her is a screen connected to the computer. She is asked to predict what number will appear on the screen.
>
> Let a *well-formed belief* be a belief in a proposition of the following form, where n is some real number:
>
> $S(n) = \langle n$ will appear on the screen$\rangle$.
>
> The computer scans Alice's brain and determines what number will appear on the screen according to the following rules (where 'Bel(P)' = 'Alice believes P'):
>
> If $\mathrm{Bel}(S(n))$, $(\forall m \neq n){\sim}\mathrm{Bel}(S(m))$, and $n \geq 0$, then $S(n/2 + 1)$ is made true.
>
> If $\mathrm{Bel}(S(n))$, $(\forall m \neq n){\sim}\mathrm{Bel}(S(m))$, and $n < 0$, then $S(n/2 - 1)$ is made true.
>
> Otherwise, S(16) is made true.
>
> There is a one-minute delay between the scan time and the display time. If, during that time, Alice changes her well-formed beliefs, the computer rescans and the clock starts anew.
>
> Alice knows all of this. Moreover, she has no particular disposition concerning what to believe about the number that will appear on the screen, and knows this about herself.

Let a belief about what number will appear on the screen be *stable* if it is such that, if Alice holds it for the entire one-minute interval (while not holding any other beliefs about what number will appear on the screen that are well-formed), it will be true.

Notice that there are only two stable well-formed beliefs: *a belief in S(2)* and *a belief in S(-2)*.

In "A Short Refutation...," Reisner argues for the following claims:

claim #1: There are no evidential considerations that bear on what number will appear on the screen.

> The rationale for this claim: although Alice has evidence for what number will appear on the screen *given* what her doxastic state is, she has no evidence what her doxastic state will be (which is supposed to be especially clear given that there are multiple fixed points to this numbers game).

claim #2: It is permissible for Alice to believe S(2) and also permissible for Alice to believe S(-2).

> This is supposed to be intuitive. We could also defend it by appeal to the following principle:
>
> *Positive Knowledge*: If you know that P would be true were you to believe it, then you are permitted to believe P.

claim #3: It is impermissible for Alice to believe S(*n*) for all values of *n* other than 2 and -2.

Again this is supposed to be intuitive. Reisner also supports it by appealing to

Negative Knowledge: If you know ~P, then you are not permitted to believe P.

But Reisner's rationale for Negative Knowledge is unconvincing. (The factivity of knowledge is no help deriving Negative Knowledge, since we can be permitted to believe falsehoods.) Also, it is not at all clear that Alice knows, say, ~S(16).

So Reisner would be better off defending claim #3 by appealing to

*Negative Knowledge**: If you know that P would be false were you to believe it, then you are not permitted to believe P.

claim #4: It is impermissible for Alice to suspend judgment on S(*n*) for all values of *n*.

As before, Reisner defends this claim by appealing to a principle that both is difficult to justify and doesn't seem to do the work he needs it to do. So I think he is better off appealing instead to

*Non-Suspension**: If you know that P would be true were you to suspend judgment on it, then you are not permitted to suspend judgment on P.

*Non-Suspension***: If you know that P would be false were you to suspend judgment on it, then you are not permitted to suspend judgment on P.

claim #5: Alice is required to either believe S(2) or believe S(-2).

Reisner takes this to follow from claims #2-4, given certain inference rules that are taken for granted in standard deontic logic.

But there are multiple problems here. For instance, it's not clear we should think of permissions and requirements as being operators that bind propositions (rather than binding attitudes and actions), and it's not clear the range of alternatives Reisner considers exhausts every possibility open to Alice (what if she forms no doxastic states at all about what number will appear on the screen?).

claim #6: Alice has a normative reason to either believe S(2) or believe S(-2).

Reisner takes this to follow from claim #5.

But this is a bad inference (even if we allow Reisner his assumption that 'Alice has a reason for ___' bind propositions, not actions or attitudes). Claim #5 might be true because Alice has a reason to believe S(2) and a different reason to believe S(-2) (and no other reasons). Or claim #5 might be true because Alice has a reason against every alternative to believing S(2) and believing S(-2) (and no other reasons).

Despite my reservations about the case Reisner makes for claims #5-6 following from claims #2-4, this doesn't much matter for his overall argument: if claims #2-4 are true, it is very plausible that what makes this the case is that Alice has a reason to believe S(2) and also has a reason to believe S(-2). This would be enough, given claim #1, to show that evidentialism about reasons for belief is false.

Reisner is a little cagey about whether Alice's reasons to believe S(2) and to believe S(-2) are *non-evidential epistemic reasons for belief* (because of their tie to truth) or instead are *pragmatic reasons for belief* (see "Evidentialism and the Numbers Game," pp. 311-312).

But if they *are* epistemic reasons for belief, then the many-fixed-points numbers game would be a case in which equally strong epistemic reasons for belief do not prohibitively balance.

IV. Some Complications

complication #1: There are more than two stable beliefs about what number will appear on the screen.

> Thanks to Marc-Kevin Daoust, Reisner came to realize that the following is a stable non-well-formed belief about what number will appear on the screen:
>
> - a belief in <Either 16 or some other number will appear on the screen>.
>
> But this is not the only stable non-well-formed belief about what number will appear on the screen; in fact there are infinitely many. Consider:
>
> - a belief in <Either 16, 2, or -2 will appear on the screen>,
> - a belief in <An even number will appear on the screen>,
> - a belief in <Some number will appear on the screen>.
>
> In "Pragmatic Reasons for Belief," Reisner allows that Alice is permitted to form one of these beliefs instead of believing S(2) or S(-2).
>
> But this threatens Reisner's strategy, since the same reasoning that leads one to insist that one has evidence for S(2) in the single-fixed-point numbers game might allow us to say that one has evidence for <Either 16, 2, or -2 will appear on the screen> in the many-fixed-points numbers game.
>
> > A better response: since Reisner already has trouble explaining why it is impermissible to not have any doxastic attitude at all about one of these propositions, he could insist that
> >
> > (a) one is required to have a doxastic attitude toward S(16), and
> >
> > (b) no doxastic attitude toward S(16) can be permissibly paired with one of the stable non-well-formed beliefs about what number will appear on the screen.

complication #2: A belief in S(2) and a belief in S(-2) are not, in fact, auto-alethic beliefs.

> It is not a belief in S(2) on its own at a given time that "secures its own truth."
>
> Rather, what secures the truth of that belief is the presence of that belief *for an entire minute*, plus *a lack of a large number of other doxastic attitudes*.
>
> > Similarly, if Alice suspends judgment on some S(*n*) and comes to realize, via introspection, that she is doing so at a given time, she cannot "infer" from this that S(16) will be made true.
> >
> > Though maybe she has good inductive evidence that it will be made true?

complication #3: Alice's (putative) non-evidential reasons to believe S(2) and to believe S(-2) are not plausibly reasons for which she can hold those beliefs.

> Before she comes to believe S(2), Alice's non-evidential reason to believe S(2) is something like: [If I were to believe S(2), then that belief would be true].
>
> But after she comes to believe S(2), she has a new reason to believe S(2), and plausibly this is the only reason for which she holds her belief, namely: [I believe S(2), and that ensures that S(2) is true].
>
> (Note: here I set complication #2 to one side.)
>
> Moreover, when Alice comes to believe S(2), her non-evidential reason to believe S(-2) *at that time* disappears.
>
> > But if something can only be a normative reason (i.e. a reason to) if it is possible for it to serve as a motivating reason (i.e. a reason for which), as many philosophers hold, then we should be suspicious that we really do have non-evidential normative reasons here.

complication #4: Given that Alice's reasons change once she forms a given doxastic attitude about what number will appear on the screen, why need we think she is required to be in a stable doxastic state?

> In other words, maybe it's not so bad to say that at first she's required to suspend; then once she introspects and realizes this, she's required to believe S(16); then once she introspects and realizes that, she's required to believe S(9); and so on, until she gives up and suspends, starting the cycle over again.

complication #5: There are variants of the number game in which, if we follow Reisner's reasoning, it seems that there is *no* permissible doxastic state that Alice could be in.

> For example, consider *the zero-fixed-points number game*, which is just like the many-fixed-points number game except the rules are:
>
> > If Bel(S(n)) and $(\forall m \neq n)$~Bel(S(m)), then S($n + 1$) is made true.
> >
> > Otherwise, S(16) is made true.
>
> One response to this case is to accept the result that it constitutes a *doxastic dilemma*, in which no doxastic state with regard to what number will appear on the screen is permissible.
>
> But I'm inclined to say, instead, that Alice should at first suspend judgment on S(16) in this case, even though she knows that in doing so she will be believing a falsehood.
>
> I'm also inclined to say that, in this case, it's fine for there to be no stable doxastic state that Alice is permitted to be in.