

Philosophy 311: Knowledge and Justification

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Geoff Pynn

Handout 20: Alternative Hypotheses

The key idea behind Hume's argument against induction was: inductive inferences are only justified if you are justified in believing PF.

The key idea behind today's more global skeptical argument is: our ordinary beliefs are only justified if they are supported by evidence that favors them over alternative hypotheses.

Take all of your common-sense beliefs about the world around you, including the belief that there are stable physical objects which cause your experience and are roughly as you perceive them to be; call this set of beliefs CS. What's your evidence for CS?

- O I have regular and orderly perceptual experiences and memories of a mind-independent physical world, etc.

The brain-in-a-vat hypothesis (call it BIV) also explains O. Here is an argument:

1. O doesn't give you better reason to believe CS than it does to believe BIV.
2. If your evidence doesn't give you better reason to believe P than it does to believe Q, then you're not justified in believing P instead of Q.
3. So, you're not justified in believing CS instead of BIV.

Response 1: Epistemological Conservatism

The epistemological conservative says that if you believe P, then you are justified in believing P provided your evidence doesn't provide you with better reason to believe anything else.

Epistemological conservatism implies that premise 2 of the AH argument is false.

But there are pretty clear counterexamples; e.g. Two Suspects (Feldman, page 144).

Response 2: Immediate Perceptual Justification

We didn't discuss foundationalism; see Feldman chapter 4. The foundationalist says that some of your beliefs are justified on the basis of something other than beliefs; these are our *basic* beliefs. The *moderate* foundationalist says that our basic beliefs include the ordinary perceptual beliefs formed on the basis of perceptual experience; i.e., much of CS.

Moderate foundationalism seems to imply that premise 1 of AH is false: perceptual experiences give you basic justification to believe much of CS, but not to believe much of BIV.

Challenges for moderate foundationalism? Feldman mentions two, but it's not clear how serious they are.

Response 3: Inference to the Best Explanation

We generally presuppose that when multiple hypotheses explain some piece of evidence E, that E gives us reason to believe the *best* of the competing hypotheses. We typically regard *inference to the best explanation* (IBE) as a source of justified belief. Feldman's example:

E We see human-boot-shaped footprints in the sand along the beach.

Two explanations for E:

- T1 People wearing boots recently walked along the beach.
- T2 Cows wearing people boots and walking on their hind legs recently walked along the beach.

T1 is a better explanation than T2, and we'd generally think that E gave you reason to believe T1 rather than T2. What makes one explanation better than another? Vogel gives three criteria:

1. Good explanations are not 'ad hoc'; i.e., they have independent plausibility
2. Simpler explanations are better than complex explanations
3. Better explanations include 'higher-level' explanations of 'lower-level' ones (roughly: explanations are better when they don't lead to more 'why'-questions)

T1 does better on all three criteria. It's less ad hoc, it's simpler, and it doesn't leave any further why-questions open. Vogel's claim: the 'Real World Hypothesis' (i.e., CS) better explains our experiences (i.e., O) than does the 'Computer Skeptical Hypothesis' (i.e., BIV).

This is a way of denying premise 1 of AH. If CS explains O better than BIV, then it seems that O does provide us with better reason to believe CS than BIV.

Two problems: first, it's not really clear that CS *is* a better explanation for O than is BIV (either by Vogel's criteria, or by any plausible criteria). Second, this just replaces one hard epistemological problem with another: what justifies IBE?

Response 4: A False Presupposition About Your Evidence?

Note that the argument as stated is not valid; it relies on a further assumption:

Assp. O is the only evidence you have relevant to the truth of CS.

But we could deny the Assumption. In particular we could say that some of your perceptual evidence includes propositions about the external world. For example, perhaps when, upon seeing an apple, you form the perceptual belief *there's an apple before me*, that proposition is part of your total evidence. Since that proposition entails that you're not a brain in a vat, your total evidence would then favor CS over BIV (by entailing that BIV is false). Thus even if 1 and 2 are true, the Assumption is false.