Constructing the World

Lecture 3: The Case for A Priori Scrutability

David Chalmers

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'.

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.

_____

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?

- ...

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 ⊃ 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 ⊃ 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 $cr^*(M) = \Phi$ at t_2, and one acquires total relevant evidence E between t_1 and t_2, and $cr^*(M|E)$ is defined at t_1, then $cr^*(M|E) = \Phi$ at t_1.

    - Conditionalization entails weak reconditionalization

- Synchronic reconditionalization: If $cr^*(M) = \Phi$ at t_2, and one acquires total relevant evidence E between t_1 and t_2, and $cr^*(M|E)$ is defined at t_2, then $cr^*(M|E) = \Phi$ at t_2, 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 ~E (and M) is conditionally scrutable from PQTI*. Does E play the same role in knowledge of PQTI* → M as in knowledge of PQTI → 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 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