The Overpopulation of Solutions to Philosophical Problems

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Outline

A Conjecture

What can be learned through intersubjective dialogue in philosophical disputes? That is, what can be learned from mutual criticism of the validity and soundness of proposed deductive arguments?

I conjecture that dialogue exposes nothing more than that (1) there exists incoherence in a set of propositions or that (2) a set of propositions entails unacceptable consequences.

Thus, I cannot give an argument that justifies the above conjecture, but I can eliminate competing conjectures. This talk explains how to eliminate the competition.

The Problem of Overpopulation

There is a difficulty for a community in choosing in a principled way among competing, mutually exclusive solutions to philosophical problems. That is, it is a problem of group decision making under conditions of ignorance.

Each solution is plausible to individuals that hold different assumptions about which properties of solutions are desirable.

These solutions are not mundane: they are conceptually distant from whether there is an apple on a table or whether I ought to go to the corner shop.

This is the *problem of overpopulation*. How can we adjudicate between competing solutions?

The Problem of Overpopulation

The problem of overpopulation is expressed in Kołakowski's *Law of Infinite Cornucopia* [Kołakowski, 2001, 79]:

For any proposition, including propositions about which sorts of properties of propositions (specifically, propositions about solutions) are desirable, it is possible to construct a deductive argument that entails the proposition.

All propositions are (in principle) defensible so long as one is willing to accept premises that entail the proposition.

The problem of overpopulation is related to–but different from–the Duhem-Quine problem: '[a]ny statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system' [Quine, 1961, 43. cf. 41].

The first problem: a system of coherent propositions exists that entails any proposition; the second: any singular proposition can be defended from criticism by revising other members of the presently accepted system of propositions.

The two conclusions are absurd: some propositions are not (presumably) defensible, or at least not *rationally* defensible; some revisions to members of a system of propositions are (presumably) rational, yet after some number *n* of revisions they are no longer rational.

The Primary Function of Argumentation: Positive Reasons for Belief

How can we *rationally adjudicate* between solutions to our philosophical problems?

A proposal:
Reduce the population down: the solution that has a *good reason for belief* (the belief is justified, warranted, probabilified, etc.).

All other solutions that lack good reasons are rejected; if no good reasons are given, then one should refrain from belief.

The Scandal of Deduction

Since Aristotle philosophers have attempted to tackle the problem that all deductive arguments appear to be circular or question-begging. [Aristotle, 1960, II xvi 64b28-65a26].[1]

This conflict has been elaborated on in the 'scandal of deduction': sound arguments implicitly or explicitly include the objective information of the conclusion within the premises. [Dummett, 1978, 297][2]

However, 'begging the question' or a *petitio principii* is considered an informal fallacy where a deductive argument includes the objective informative content of its conclusion within the premises.

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[1]Cf. [DeMorgan, 1847]; [Govier, 2001, 85, 163-5]; [Harris, 1992]; [Mill, 1842, Book II, Ch. II-III, §1]; [Keynes, 1906, Part III, Ch. IX]; [Walton, 1991].

[2][Hintikka, 1973, 222 et passim];
[Peirce and Ladd-Franklin, 1901, D'Agostino and Floridi, 2009]

If all sound deductive arguments are question-begging, which premises ought to be adopted?

If we can identify a set of rationally defensible standards for good reasons for belief, the problem of overpopulation is solved.

What if there is disagreement about the set of standards for good reasons for belief? The problem of overpopulation reasserts itself: there exist many different competing standards. How should we adjudicate between these standards?

The Problem of the Criterion

What standards of argumentation are rationally defensible?

Philosophers desire a criterion of rationality. How can they determine which criterion should be accepted? They must rationally adjudicate between different criteria. But how do they determine that they rationally adjudicate between different criteria? They must have a criterion of rationality…

This is a variation of the problem of the criterion: '…we would need a judicatory instrument; to verify this instrument, we need a demonstration; to verify the demonstration, an instrument: there we are in a circle.' [Montaigne, 1976, 454][3]

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[3]Cf. [Plato, 1967, 80d]

Two quotations from Wittgenstein exemplify this pessimism:

'If I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say, "This is simply what I do" ' [Wittgenstein, 2001, §217].[4]

'Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with another, then each man declares the other a fool and a heretic…At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*.' [Wittgenstein, 1972, 611-12]

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[4] Cf. the summary of Peirce's thought in [Hookway, 1985, 229], Principle Zero in [van Fraassen, 2002, 41]; [Huyssteen, 1999, 195]

Wittgenstein's remarks reveal at least four undesirable consequences of argumentation as persuasion:

1. The standards of argumentation are accepted without good reason; '[t]here is no rock which can serve as a fulcrum on which …claims …can be weighed in some absolutely decisive way' [White, 1959, 48]. This creates an 'independent standing ground' or 'impregnable stronghold' for any standard [Heim, 1957, 32-33].

2. Other forms of persuasion may serve equally well, such as linguistic trickery or threats of violence.

3. The problem of overpopulation is not solved by appealing to good reasons for belief: there is now the problem of overpopulation of standards.

4. Nothing is learned through argumentation–other than that there exists disagreement.

A Few Conjectures

The function of intersubjective argumentation is entirely *critical*, of dissuading someone from accepting a solution to a philosophical problem *that has already been accepted*.

If it deductively entails a contradiction (*modus tollendo tollens*) or entails an unacceptable consequence (*reductio ad absurdum*, at least one proposition is false [Hattiangadi, 1978, Hattiangadi, 1979].

In both cases the conjunction of propositions entails no course of action for it entails all courses of action: 'A self-contradictory sentence asserts too much; it is too informative to be true' [Bar-Hillel and Carnap, 1964].

A Response

Any contradiction is not a good reason for rejecting a conclusion, for 'when a conjunction…is refuted, there is no principled way to distribute blame among the conjuncts…' [Strevens, 2001, 516].[5]

Therefore, any choice in response to criticism is not *logically* forbidden, including embracing contradictions [Grünbaum, 1962].

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[5] Cf. [Lakatos, 1970, 100-2]; [Grünbaum, 1962, 19].

A Response, cont.

However, there still exist guiding normative principles: we ought to abhor contradictions.

This is why the problem of overpopulation is about a *finite* number of competing, mutually philosophical solutions to philosophical problems. We already exclude a vast number of theories.

Instead of focusing on standards of permissibility, we should focus on standards of impermissibility.

Answering the Problem of the Criterion

We must have a criterion of *ir*rationality: its role is to proscribe, not to prescribe.

To adopt a criterion, we make a conjecture. If there are problems with this conjecture, reject it, for it is a bad criterion; if there are not problems with the conjecture, it is permissible to (tentatively) adopt it.

The problem of the criterion is terminated before it can begin.

We can (maybe) do no more than show how good reasons as a standard of argumentation lead either to a contradiction or an absurd conclusion. We cannot give good reasons to think that criticism succeeds in all circumstances.

If good reasons are impossible, what is left? Bad reasons, i.e., incoherence. [Bartley, 1984].

Are there any *problems* for the conjecture? Should we accept incoherence in most cases? No, I think not. We have no solution worth considering if we have contradictory courses of action.

Coherence is (possibly) a minimal standard (outside some cases involving liar paradoxes [Priest, 2001]).

Answering the Scandal of Deduction

Arguments reveal contradictions within a conjunction of premises.

A subject learns something new when they discover a contradiction, i.e., that not all premises can be accepted.

Arguments still serve a function, even though it is not to give good reasons for belief.

Some Potential Problems

1. Preface Paradox: Already rational to believe that for all sets of sentences, at least one sentence is false. This is already known. Therefore, discovering incoherence is not discovery.

2. Preface Paradox Extended: The preface and the body of sentences imply the other's falsify. It is rational to accept both. Therefore, all proposed solutions are incoherent.
   Reply: but this is absurd. Two approaches: there is a small enough set of sentences that the preface paradox does not apply to; or, the issue is the discovery of the existence of falsity, not prior rational belief in the existence of falsity.

Conclusion

This conclusion is not just meta-philosophical: argumentation *simpliciter* functions to discover error; any present success may be overturned by the discovery of error.

It restructures our understanding of the history of philosophy: all is nothing but conjectures and criticisms, including the conjecture that the standards of argumentation involve good reasons for belief [Popper, 1972].

'Although ancient self-refutation arguments cannot 'falsify' our most radical adversaries' views (and defuse our own most hyperbolical doubts) by proving that what they envisage is 'logically impossible' they can silence them, by delimiting the area of constructive philosophical inquiry and debate.' [Castagnoli, 2007, 69]

'For sometimes we conclude a manifest absurdity from the negation of a hypothesis, and then the hypothesis is true; or instead we conclude a manifest absurdity from its affirmation, and then the hypothesis is established as false; and when we have not been able to derive an absurdity, from either its negation or its affirmation, the hypothesis remains in doubt; so that, to establish the truth of a hypothesis, it is not enough that all the phenomena follow from it, but if there follows something contrary to one of the phenomena, that is enough to establish its falsity.' [Pascal, 1647, 29.v.1647]

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