Concepts and the Scrutability of Truth

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Once we know enough about the world, we’re in a position to know what our concepts and our terms refer to.
Examples

- E.g. ‘water’
  - A priori, we don’t know what ‘water’ refers to
    - Could be H2O, XYZ, whatever
  - Once we know enough about the environment, we know that ‘water’ refers to H2O
    - E.g. given knowledge of appearance, behavior, composition, distribution, history of environmental objects and substances

Nontriviality

- Trivial version: Allow the knowledge in the antecedent to include *water*-knowledge

- Nontrivial version: Disallow knowledge involving *water* and cognate notions from the antecedent

- The nontrivial version is plausibly true for many or most terms and concepts
  - Knowledge of *underlying* truths suffices for knowledge of what ‘water’, ‘Homer’, etc, refer to.
Idealization

- Speakers given the relevant knowledge may *in fact* make mistaken judgments about reference
  - E.g. ‘68+57’

- But they’re *in a position to* make correct judgments, given rational reflection
  - I.e. the relevant empirical knowledge plus sufficient rational reflection enables knowledge of reference

- In effect, the scrutability thesis invokes a normative idealization.
Scrutability of Reference II

For most terms $T$, there exists a truth $D$ such that $D$ is independent of $T$ and such that knowing that $D$ is true puts the speaker in a position to know the referent of $T$.

- $D$ is independent of $T$ when $D$ doesn’t contain $T$ or close cognates

- E.g. for ‘water’, $D$ might involve truths about appearance, behavior, composition, distribution of environmental objects and substances (plus their relation to oneself).
Problems

Problem 1: The notion of ‘knowing what an expression refers to’ is unclear.

Problem 2: For some expressions, it’s unclear (maybe indeterminate) what sort of thing they refer to
  - E.g. ‘number’, ‘symphony’, etc.
  - Cf. Quinean inscrutability of reference

Solution: Move to the scrutability of truth.
Scrutability of Truth:

Once we know enough about the world, we’re in a position to know whether our utterances and our beliefs are true.

Avoids problem 1

The notion of knowing truth-value is relatively clear

Minimizes problem 2

This will only affect a few sentences such as ‘two is a set of sets’
Scrutability of Truth II

- For most terms $T$ used by a speaker, and for any truth $S$ involving $T$, there exists a truth $D$ such that $D$ is independent of $T$ and $D$ is epistemically sufficient for $S$.
  - $D$ is epistemically sufficient for $S$ when knowing that $D$ is the case puts the speaker in a position to know (on sufficient rational reflection, without needing further empirical information) that $S$ is the case.
Scrutability of Truth III

- There is a relatively limited vocabulary $V$ such that for any truth $S$, there is a $V$-truth $D$ such that $D$ is epistemically sufficient for $S$.

- To pare down the vocabulary, just eliminate “scrutable” terms one-by-one according to the previous reasoning.

- A minimal such $V$ is a sort of *epistemic basis* for actual truths.
From Epistemic Sufficiency to A Priori Entailment

- Knowing D enables knowledge of T without further empirical information
- Stronger thesis: the inference from D to T is justified a priori
  - If empirical knowledge E is needed, just put this in the scrutability base!
  - Even a speaker who suspends all empirical beliefs can know that if D is the case, then T is the case.
- See Chalmers and Jackson 2001 for detailed argument.
Scrutability of Truth IV

- There is a relatively limited vocabulary V such that for any truth S, there is a V-truth D such that D implies S.
  - D implies S when the material conditional ‘D->S’ is a priori
  - N.B. This doesn’t require that S be definable in terms of V-vocabulary
Epistemic Basis

Q: How small can an epistemic basis be?

C&J: PQTI, a conjunction of
- $P =$ microphysical truths
- $Q =$ phenomenal truths
- $T =$ a “that’ s-all” truth
- $I =$ indexical truths (speaker’ s place/time, etc).

Yields knowledge of macroscopic appearance, behavior, composition, etc, which suffices for knowledge of ordinary macroscopic truths.
Hard Cases

- Hard cases for PQTl scrutability
  - Vague truths (on epistemic theory)
  - Deep mathematical truths (CH?)
  - Moral/normative truths?
  - Some metaphysical truths?

- Handle hard cases by
  - Indeterminacy of truth-value; or
  - Idealization of apriority; or
  - Expanding the scrutability base (if necessary)
Minimal Basis?

- Further reduction of PQT: P is arguably scrutable from observational/causal/categorical truths
  - e.g. from underlying Ramsey sentence.

- Observational truths are arguably scrutable from phenomenal/causal/spatiotemporal truths.

- Spatiotemporal truths are *maybe* scrutable from phenomenal/causal truths.

- Leaves phenomenal, causal, spatiotemporal (?), indexical – plus logical, categorical, etc.
Generalizing Scrutability

- Scrutability thesis applies to actual truths
  - But presumably is an instance of something more general
  - E.g. if we knew that our environment is like the XYZ-world, could know that ‘water is XYZ’ is true
  - Can know non-empirically that if we’re in the XYZ-environment, then water is XYZ.

- So we might generalize scrutability from actual truths to arbitrary epistemic possibilities.
Generalized Scrutability

- Generalized scrutability:
  - There’s some relatively limited vocabulary $V$, such that for all epistemically possible $S$, there’s some epistemically possible $V$-sentence $D$ such that $D$ implies $S$.
    - $S$ is epistemically possible when $S$ [better: $\text{det}(S)$] is not ruled out a priori.

- Here $V$ is a *generalized epistemic basis*
  - A scrutability base for arbitrary epistemic possibilities, not just for actual truths
  - A basis for epistemic space?
Conceptual Scrutability

- Conceptual formulation of scrutability
  - There’s some limited set of concepts V such that
    - For all true thoughts T, T is implied by some true V-thought
    - For all epistemically possible thoughts T, T is implied by some V-thought

- A thought = a world-directed propositional attitude token (e.g. an occurrent belief or hypothesis)
- Concepts = constituents of thoughts
  - N.B. mental entities, not abstract entities.
  - Concepts have contents but aren’t contents.
Primitive Concepts

- Traditionally: primitive concepts = those in terms of which all other concepts can be defined.
  - E.g. a set of primitive concepts V, such that all concepts are a priori equivalent to some V-concept.
  - But: it seems that most concepts can’t be defined in this way.

- Alternative: primitive concepts = those in terms of which the application of all other concepts can be determined
  - E.g. application of knowledge can be determined by specification of situation using non-knowledge concepts, so knowledge isn’t primitive
  - Application of cause, consciousness, time, exists (??) can’t be determined in this way, so these may be primitive.
A conceptual basis = a minimal set of concepts that serves as a basis for conceptual scrutability.

Primitive concepts = members of a conceptual basis?
- There may be multiple conceptual bases, some with cognate concepts, etc, some fairly complex, etc.
- May end with circles of (cognate) primitive concepts.
  - E.g. cause, law, natural necessity, counterfactual dependence?
  - And might require a maximally simple conceptual basis.

Candidates for primitive concepts:
- Phenomenal concepts, causal concepts, logical and mathematical (?) concepts, categorical concepts, spatiotemporal (?) concepts.
Epistemic Space

- Can use a conceptual basis to define a space of epistemic possibilities
  - A V-thought $T$ is complete iff for any thought $T_1$ such that $T_1$ implies $T$, $T$ implies $T_1$.

- Complete thoughts correspond to maximally specific epistemically possible hypotheses.

- A maximal epistemic possibility (= scenario) is an equivalence class of complete V-thoughts (under mutual implication)
Epistemic Truth-Conditions

- Given a complete V-thought, the truth-value of a given thought $T$ will be implied: e.g.
  - $V_1$ implies $T$
  - $V_2$ implies $\neg T$

- $T$ is associated with *epistemic truth-conditions*
  - $T$ is true relative to scenario $S_1$ [tied to $V_1$]
  - $T$ is false relative to scenario $S_2$ [tied to $V_2$]

- Can call this the *epistemic content* of $T$. 

Epistemic content is a variety of truth-conditional content that is tied constitutively to inferential role.

The epistemic content of T is a function of its (normative) inferential role relative to V-thoughts.
- E.g. normative dispositions to judge T or ~T, given the judgment that V1.

Given the understanding of implication in terms of a priori entailment, this is a tie between truth-conditions of thought and a priori inferential role.
Epistemic Content of Concepts

- Can extend this account to an account of the epistemic content (epistemic application-conditions) of concepts.

- For a (singular) concept C, there will be implications:
  - V1 implies $C = X_1, C = X_2, \ldots$,
  - Where $X_1, X_2, \ldots$ are descriptive V-concepts.
  - Equivalence classes of descriptive V-concepts (relative to V1) can be associated with individuals in the scenario S1.
  - So relative to S1, C picks out the corresponding individual.
  - Relative to S2, C picks out an individual in S2, and so on.

- Similarly (mutatis mutandis) for general concepts, kind concepts, property concepts, etc.
Concept Individuation

- Concept *types* can be individuated in various ways.
- One way: two concepts are of the same type when they have the same epistemic content.
  - This provides an individuation of concept types by a priori inferential role.
- More fine-grained than extensional individuation.
  - *Hesperus* and *Phosphorus* are of different types.
- More coarse-grained than Fregean individuation.
  - 68+57 and 115 are of the same type.
- This coarse-graining is inevitable (?) given individuation in terms of apriority, as opposed to cognitive significance.
Epistemic content is arguably a form of narrow content, as long as
- Conceptual bases correspond between twins
  - If $V$ is a conceptual basis for one subject, a corresponding set of concepts $V'$ is a conceptual basis in a duplicate.
- Implication is narrow
  - When $T_1$ implies $T_2$ in one subject, and a duplicate subject has corresponding thoughts $T_1'$ and $T_2'$, then $T_1'$ implies $T_2'$.

These allow us to identify scenarios across subjects.

The epistemic content of a thought $T$ will be the same as the epistemic content of a corresponding thought $T'$ in any duplicate.
Naturalizing Content

Could this account be used to “naturalize” epistemic content?

- Issues 1: the account doesn’t yield a substantive account of the content of primitive concepts
- Issue 2: it appeals to an unreduced notion of implication (or apriority).

But: it grounds the content of all concepts in the content of primitive concepts and a notion of implication (inferential role).

- Will need a separate account of the content of primitive concepts (phenomenal intentionality?) and of inference

A two-stage grounding of content?
More generally, the scrutability theses (if accepted) places a strong constraint on theorizing about meaning and truth:

- Links inferential role and reference/truth
  - In tension with many causal theories of content, with epistemic theory of vagueness, etc?
  - Coheres with a broadly Fregean view

- Tends to support anti-realism about inscrutable domains
  - E.g. in metaphysics: the deep ontology of objects?

- Captures the plausible core of stronger and implausible anti-realist views?