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Commentary on “Pushing the Bounds of Rationality: Argumentation and Extended Cognition”

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Suppose one claims that to reason well is to reason in accord with logic, that is, following Frege, the laws of truth. According to David Godden, some might argue that since one cannot reason in accord with logic, one cannot be obligated to reason in accord with logic, and so the norms of reasoning cannot be accordance with logic. Suppose instead that one claims that to reason well is to be appropriately responsive to reasons, to appraise “the strengths of one’s reasons, and adhere... to a standard of *evidence proportionalism* whereby one accords the degrees of commitment to one’s views with the strength of the evidence for them” [emphasis in original] (Pinto as cited in Godden, p. 5). Again some might argue that since one cannot be appropriately responsive to reasons, one cannot be obligated to be properly responsive to reasons, and so the norms of reasoning cannot be being appropriately responsive to reasons. Godden ends his paper by suggesting that the practices and technologies of argumentation theory expand our reasoning capabilities, for example, expand what we can keep track of in terms of consistency and consequence and so expand our reasoning responsibilities. He concludes that those who are “committed to ... the picture of argumentative rationality sketched above, or the notion that at least some rational norms derive at least partly from logical ideals, should take heart” (p. 15).

I have questions or challenges, though not all equally problematic, for almost every step in this chain of reasoning.

First, what does it mean to reason in accord with logic? In one sense, Gilbert Harman is correct when he says that logic in itself is not prescriptive. Logic just describes the laws of truth and there are a lot of them—a lot more than you might initially suspect. For example, there are laws that articulate what would happen if A, then B and B, so A were allowed as an acceptable inference rule. Given certain other principles the result would be an inconsistent system, but excluding those principles the result would be a consistent (though I suspect odd) system. Assuming for the moment that any individual’s actual belief set is finite, for any potential additional belief, there will be a logical system that holds those beliefs as truths of the system and allows the additional belief to also be a truth of the system. The system may or may not be consistent, and may have certain other odd properties, but it will exist. Hence, in the sense in which logic is not prescriptive, any bit of reasoning can be said to be in accord with logic (which is presumably contrary to the result that Harman wanted.)

But of course we have norms of logic as well—some systems are *better* than others. We strongly prefer consistent systems to inconsistent systems. [Why? Well, one answer might be that inconsistent systems (combined with logical closure) explode and explosion is bad. But why is explosion bad? Because we, as actual reasoners, do not engage in explosion and so such systems cannot represent what we take to be our good reasoning? Why such reasoning is good on such a view, however, remains a complete mystery. Perhaps explosion is bad because explosive

systems do not discriminate truth from falsity and we ought/need to so discriminate? Is the discrimination of truth from falsity just a basic intrinsic good in no further need of explanation?] Sound systems are better than unsound systems. Complete systems were once desired, but Gödel nixed the possibility that we could have a complete system for anything close to the full domains over which we reason. Presumably, then we do not want our reasoning to accord with any old logical system, but rather with good or correct logical systems—we want to reason in accord with the *norms* of logic and it is definitely an open question what those norms are, whether we need to reason in accord with all of them, and what the ultimate source of the norms of logic are. Second, is it really true that one cannot reason in accord with logic or the norms of logic? Don't we, sometimes at least, clearly reason in accord with at least some of the norms of logic? Even if we suppose that it is impossible, because of human frailties perhaps, for one to *always* reason in accord with the norms of logic, it would not follow that for any particular instance of reasoning we are not obligated to reason in that particular case in accord with the norms of logic. What if we predictably and systematically do not reason in accord with the norms of logic? Perhaps then there is a sense in which we cannot reason in accord with the norms of logic, but the empirical evidence falls far short. At best the evidence shows that a preponderance of, but certainly not all, individuals in certain circumstances predictably and systematically do not reason in accord with certain norms of logic. But that does not show that they cannot so reason, and certainly does not show that 'we' in general cannot so reason.

What of Harman's arguments against consistency and closure as rational norms? I agree with Harman that a rational fallible person ought to believe at least one of his or her beliefs is false, but I deny the result is an inconsistent belief set. Suppose I have 1000 beliefs, each of which I give a 99% chance of being true—in other words I believe each of them. I should also believe that there is a high probability that at least one of those beliefs is mistaken—and there is a 99.99956% chance that at least one of those beliefs is false given that each has a 99% chance of being true. Of course, if I gave all of my beliefs, including the belief that one of my beliefs is false, a 100% chance of being true, I would be inconsistent—but no rational fallible person ought to attribute a 100% chance of being true to all or even most of his or her beliefs.

Do we believe all the logical consequences of our beliefs (or at least those we are unwilling to give up?) Occurrently, no, but dispositionally, most likely yes. I see no obvious reason why logical closure cannot merely be a property of one's dispositional belief set—it is not at all implausible that we are at least dispositionally committed to the logical consequences (mostly trivial anyway) of what we believe. Of course, in many cases the logical consequences of what I believe are inconsistent with other things I believe and when this is made occurrent or manifest to me I have the problem of revising my occurrent belief set to try to make it consistent again (this is just Godden's principle of no manifest inconsistency). Of course, there are plenty of (consistent and closed) systems that are incapable of modeling belief set revision. But that at most tells me that the correct model of belief revision, if there is one, is not one of those systems—it does not tell me that there is no correct logical system of belief revision.

Third, does ought implies can universally hold? Is the psychopath who cannot refrain from attempting to kill people thereby permitted to attempt to kill people? But if there are subtleties to the correct scope of the ought implies can principle, then might not those subtleties affect attempts to use the principle to weaken the norms of rationality? [Note that the converse of ought implies can is not cannot so ought not, but rather cannot, so not obligated, which is cannot so permitted not.]

Fourth, even if we were not obligated to reason in accord with the norms of logic, would that mean that the norms of reasoning are not accordance with the norms of logic or reason responsiveness? No. The norms of rationality may just be accordance with the norms of logic or reason responsiveness and yet because I cannot (always) reason in accordance with the norms of logic or be reason responsive I may not be obligated to reason (always) in accordance with the norms of logic or be reason responsive—but that would just mean that I am not (always) obligated to reason well. [One could even keep the obligation, but aver that I am not blameworthy for not always fulfilling my obligations. I might be excused in some cases, say, because reasoning well is extremely difficult in a given situation and to the degree that it is difficult, I might be held less to blame for failing.][At least one of the versions of bounded rationality that Godden presents seems quite close to this position which makes it hard to see how it is a case of bounded rationality as opposed to bounded responsibility for my reasoning.]

Fifth, is evidence proportionalism always correct? Suppose I am refereeing a soccer match and I am moderately confident I see a foul and so call the foul. The reaction of both teams indicates otherwise. The offending team objects strenuously; even the receiving team gives plenty of shaking of heads and wry smiles and apologies to the other team to indicate they too do not think there was a foul. I was only moderately confident to begin with based on my visual evidence and I now have plenty of contrary evidence. Should I reduce my confidence in whether there was a foul? Absolutely not. If I do, two very bad things are likely to happen. First, I will try to replay the situation in my head to see if I really was wrong. The result is that I will be focusing less on the game as it currently is and so decrease my chances of getting subsequent calls correct. Second, for future situations in which I am paying attention I will overthink what I see, perhaps by trying to replay it a couple times in my head before making the call. The result again will actually be a decrease in the number of correct calls. In other words, given the sort of psychological agent I am (along with plenty of other people) being an evidence proportionalist will make me a worse epistemic agent in this case (and a worse referee). I will be a better epistemic agent and get more of the future calls correct and so be a better referee, if I in fact, ignore the contrary evidence or at least not let the contrary evidence adjust my confidence in having made the correct call.

Granted, after the match there will be plenty of time to debrief and evaluate the evidence again (and get more evidence from the other officials, or the match assessor, or even video replay if available). But that just shows that what is rational to believe and do in a given situation may vary from what it is rational to believe or do upon reflection. And if there is a difference between in situ rationality and reflective rationality, then one may begin to wonder the degree to which those appealing to logic and those arguing in favor of bounded rationality are arguing about the same thing.

Sixth, and finally, does the appeal to the practices and technologies of argumentation theory help resist what Godden sees as the potential weakening of the norms of rationality? Perhaps, but not, I suspect, the way Godden argues it does.

What makes using the practices and techniques better than not using them at least in some situations? How could I tell that diagramming an argument or performing a pragma-dialectical analysis improves my reasoning capabilities? [By the way trying to diagram my reasoning or to perform a pragma-dialectical analysis of my conversation with the objecting captain would not be helpful in the middle of the soccer pitch.] To answer those questions I would have to know what is better/worse reasoning is and that can presumably only be done relative to the satisfaction of some norms/standards. Now if the standards Godden appeals to are

conformity with logic or reason responsiveness, then those who challenge those standards will cry foul, since appealing to the very standards he was trying to defend is question-begging.

The bounded rationality argument appealing to ought implies can is highly suspect and I recommend not playing within the confines of that argument and trying to push our capabilities towards being able to satisfy more rigorous standards. I am not doubting that the practices and technologies of argumentation theory can expand our capabilities, the same way any tool can expand our capabilities (and so might expand our responsibilities). But to tell that those practices and technologies are in fact improving (rather than hurting) my *reasoning* capabilities requires already having norms of reasoning in place—norms that must be independent of my capabilities if it is going to make sense to say that a change in my capabilities makes me better (or worse) able to satisfy the norms. The defenders of conformity to the norms of logic or to reason responsive should not take heart merely from the fact that improving our capabilities might make us better able to satisfy those norms, but rather from the fact that those who would make the constitution of the norms of reasoning involve the capabilities of the reasoner face a very serious challenge—they have no way of telling whether a change in one's capabilities constitutes an improvement or decline in one's reasoning. But isn't that what we all do for a living?