

Comments on “Learning about Inference from Argument”

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1 Plumer’s Commitment Approach

Boghossian (2014) famously argued that a hallmark of inferring q from p involves the inferrer *taking* p to support q .¹ The taking approach to inference faces problems of over-intellectualization and Carrollian regress. Plumer suggests we can make progress by abandoning Boghossian’s taking condition in favor of:

Commitment Condition. S ’s inferring q from p commits S to taking p to support q .²

Supplement. “If the inferring creature were rational enough to be generally capable of evaluating inferences, and if the context were the meta-level one of evaluating, as opposed to making, the transition from p to q , then the creature rationally must assent to the claim that p supports q .”

I’m sympathetic to much of this picture. In what follows, I raise some apparent problems, diagnose a potential source of these problems, and invite Plumer to say more about his approach in light of that diagnosis.

2 Three Problems with Supplement

2.1 Apparent Extensional Inadequacy

Window. Alma is looking out the window. She sees that the street is wet (p). By a merely associative process she comes to form the belief that it rained recently (q). If the context were the meta-level one of evaluating, then she rationally must assent to the claim that p supports q .

Supplement seems to make cases like Window impossible, because it doesn’t allow agents to fail to infer when the relevant counterfactual is nonetheless true of them.³ But such cases do seem possible.

2.2 What Is the Force of the Rational ‘Must’?

Either the ‘must’ is subjective or objective.⁴ Suppose it’s subjective. Then (i) the extensional inadequacy problem looks even worse, and (ii) Plumer can’t rely on Supplement to distinguish inference from association in cases of bad inference: cases where the premises fail, in some objective sense, to support the conclusion.

Suppose instead that the ‘must’ is objective. Then it’s hard to make sense of bad inferences. If I infer q from p and *if q , then p* by affirming the consequent, in what sense am I committed to the premises supporting q ?⁵

¹ Boghossian’s original taking condition also requires that the taking state play a causal role in the inference, but one can be a taking theorist and deny this. I defend such a view in Blake-Turner (2022).

² Plumer here follows McHugh and Way (2016, 316). Note that Plumer will still ultimately need to say more about what taking is, but I set this aside here.

³ One might require more of inference than a transition that satisfies Supplement. But I deny that Alma is even committed to the relevant content in Window.

⁴ Let “subjective” mean relative to the agent’s own attitudes. Let “objective” mean relative to something beyond the agent’s attitudes, like the agent’s evidence.

⁵ I am here reading Supplement as a biconditional: S is committed to taking p to support q iff Supplement. It may be that Plumer intends Supplement to be sufficient, but not necessary, for being committed in the relevant way.

2.3 Interpreting the Counterfactual's Antecedent

Plumer is motivated to allow for what he calls *unreflective inferences*. This is in part to allow creatures other than neurotypical adult humans to infer, e.g. “young children and probably higher animals”.⁶ Hence the counterfactual construal of commitment provided.

But the antecedent of Supplement requires us to make the would-be inferrer rational enough for evaluating inferences. This seems to mean *anything* that can represent p and q and can transition from one representation to the other can infer. Take an ant, or a crude signalling machine—anything that intuitively doesn't infer but can nonetheless causally transition between representational states. If we made said creature rational enough, then it seems it could satisfy the consequent of Supplement and so be on the way to inferring.⁷

3 What Is the Inferential Role of Commitment?

Diagnosis. The counterfactual construal of commitment that Supplement provides says too little about the inferential role of commitment. The Commitment Condition has it that S 's inference *commits* her to the relevant taking, but Supplement says nothing about how this commitment happens. Without that, it's going to be hard to distinguish genuine inferences from counterpart associations—where the agents satisfy the relevant counterfactuals but are not rationally on the hook for inferring.

Invitation. A natural idea is to make the agent's commitment more substantive. Perhaps it arises in virtue of a representational state. But then we're right back into worrying about overintellectualization and regress.⁸ I think this approach can be made to work, but I suspect that Plumer is skeptical. So I end with an invitation to say more about commitment's inferential role to make good on the promises of the interesting account he has offered.

References

- Blake-Turner, Christopher. 2022. “The Hereby-Commit Account of Inference.” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 100 (1): 86–101.
- Boghossian, Paul. 2014. “What Is Inference?” *Philosophical Studies* 169 (1): 1–18.
- McHugh, Conor, and Jonathan Way. 2016. “Against the Taking Condition.” *Philosophical Issues* 26 (1): 314–31.

⁶ Plumer is also motivated by an analogy between unreflective inferences and insincere arguments. The discussion of inference and argument is very interesting, but I unfortunately don't have time to engage with it adequately in these remarks.

⁷ Plumer writes: “Certainly, [the commitment] can be instantiated only by creatures who are in general capable of making inferences (which presumably rules out creatures lower on the phylogenetic tree).” But I don't think the class of creatures who are in general capable of making inferences is something he can take for granted.

⁸ Overintellectualization because one might worry that nonhuman animals or young children lack the requisite representational of conceptual capacities. Regress, because it's hard to fit the representational state into the inferential process in the right way.