

Armchair Philosophy and Counterfactual Thinking

Philosophy's traditional method is thinking, without observation or experiment. Crude rationalists regard philosophy's a priori method as a virtue. According to them, it makes philosophical results especially reliable, because immune from perceptual error. Crude empiricists regard philosophy's a priori method as a vice. According to them, it makes philosophical results especially unreliable, because immune from perceptual correction. The two groups share the assumption that the a priori method of philosophy is profoundly unlike the a posteriori methods of the natural sciences. They focus on philosophers' appeals to intuition, particularly in the use of imaginary counter-examples to refute theories. How do such

refutations work?

A paradigm is Edmund Gettier's 1963 refutation of the traditional analysis of knowledge as justified true belief. He sketches imaginary situations in which someone has what most people classify as a justified true belief that does not constitute knowledge.

Such a situation does not refute the

claim that knowledge actually coincides with justified true belief. What it refutes is the stronger claim, to which the traditional analysis is committed, that knowledge *necessarily* coincides with justified true belief. It does so through two claims. First, the situation is possible; it could have occurred. Second, if it had occurred, the subject would have had a justified true belief without knowledge. From those two claims, it follows that justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge.

The second claim is best formulated as a counterfactual conditional about what *would* have happened *if* the situation had occurred, rather than as a claim about what *necessarily* follows from its occurrence, because examples cannot be described in complete detail; much background must be taken for granted. We envisage the descriptions as realized in ways that minimize departures from actuality in respects about which nothing is explicitly stipulated.

Of the two claims about the Gettier cases, only the second has been disputed. It corresponds to the 'intuition' that the subject in the Gettier lacks knowledge (but has justification). The second claim is uncontroversial, because the situations Gettier describes are mundane practical and physical possibilities, not far-out science fictions. In fact, I once brought about such a situation during a lecture. The real-life occurrence of Gettier situations makes almost no difference to the epistemology of Gettier's argument.

Asserting counterfactuals is not distinctive of a priori methodology. They are often highly contingent and asserted on a posteriori grounds. We



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use them in our practical dealings with the world. Many counterfactuals are closely linked to causal statements. Counterfactuals follow from a posteriori natural laws: if it is a natural law that salt dissolves in water, then if this quantity of salt had been put in water, it would have dissolved. They also figure in the explanation of our evidence for many accepted empirical claims. We might support the claim 'There are no kangaroos on this island' with the counterfactual 'If there were any, we'd have seen some of them by now'.

We have a general cognitive ability to handle counterfactual conditionals. Sometimes we can reason from the antecedent to the consequent or to its negation, using background beliefs compatible with the antecedent. Often we seem to use a less formal or conceptually articulated process, perhaps involving some sort of mental simulation. We have no good reason to expect that the evaluation of 'philosophical' counterfactuals uses radically different cognitive capacities from the evaluation of ordinary 'unphilosophical' counterfactuals. Very often, the background knowledge needed to evaluate a counterfactual consists not of specific items of information acquired on specific occasions but of a more general sense of how things go, honed over long experience. Such a sense is typically not presented to the subject in usable verbal form.

The point is not that no distinction at all can be drawn between the a priori and the a posteriori, or that nothing falls on the a priori side, but that such a distinction lacks the significance with which it is often credited. In particular, we should not suppose it to imply major differences in reliability. If a priori intuition is understood as a distinctive cognitive capacity or pathology, it is not required for using imaginary counterexamples against philosophical theories or analyses. We have our ordinary capacities for making judgements about what we encounter, and a further capacity to evaluate counterfactuals by running those capacities 'offline'; that is already enough for philosophy to get going, without any need of a kickstart from a special faculty of intuition.

Of the two premises in Gettier's underlying argument, only the counterfactual conditional has been disputed. The other premise, that his imaginary situations are possible, is uncontroversial. In other philosophical examples, however, the possibility claim is also controversial, because the imaginary situations are more bizarre and impossible to bring about. Does the claim of their possibility rely on a distinctively philosophical faculty of intuition?

Even our capacity to assess claims of possibility and necessity can be derived from our capacity to handle counterfactuals. For possibility and necessity can be defined in terms of counterfactuals. Something is necessary if and only if whatever were the case, it would still be the case. Something is possible if and only if it is not such that whatever were the case, it would not be the case. Those definitions allow one to derive standard logical principles about possibility and necessity from standard logical principles about counterfactuals. Starting with the counterfactual conditional, we can build a promising theory of necessity and possibility. The capacity for thought about them cannot be isolated from the capacity for ordinary thought about the natural world, or excised without loss to the latter, for it is implicit in the latter.

Discussions of the epistemology of possibility often focus on imaginability or conceivability as a test of possibility: a notoriously unreliable or

circular test. Such discussions typically ignore the role of the imagination in evaluating counterfactual conditionals. In doing so, they omit the appropriate context for understanding the relation between possibility. The imagination is a standard means for running our cognitive capacities ‘offline’ in evaluating counterfactuals. The process is manifestly fallible and practically indispensable. We may have a special cognitive faculty or module dedicated to evaluating counterfactuals.

Thus investigation of the use of imaginary counterexamples in philosophy shows that they do not involve a special faculty of rational intuition or the illusion of such. They simply involve particular applications of general cognitive capacities – notably, the capacity to process counterfactuals – widely used throughout our cognitive engagement with the spatio-temporal world.