The Prospects for If-Thenism

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Steve Yablo, in the lead article, notes that many philosophical problems are calibration problems. A calibration problem arises when two claims, φ (for example, that there are at least eight planets) and ψ (for example, that numbers exist), are such that:

(1) φ entails ψ
(2) φ is probable, and
(3) ψ is relatively improbable

Yablo [2017: 1] calls calibration problems in philosophy 'hostage crises' because in philosophy they tend to 'involve a (relatively) thin, innocent claim and a (relatively) weighty, debatable one; the first is hostage to the second in that the second must hold or the first fails'.

Calibration problems are not unique to philosophy. Perhaps the most well-known calibration problem was introduced by the social psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. Tversky and Kahneman [1982] call their particular calibration problem 'the conjunction fallacy' and illustrate it with the following vignette about Linda.

> Linda is 31 years old, single, outspoken, and very bright. She majored in philosophy. As a student, she was deeply concerned with issues of discrimination and social justice, and also participated in anti-nuclear demonstrations. [ibid.: 92]

After reading the vignette, participants are asked to rank eight statements about Linda by their probability. Two of the statements on the list were:

(a) Linda is a bank teller.
(b) Linda is a bank teller.

Tversky and Kahneman reported that 85 percent of respondents indicated that they thought (b) is more likely than (a), despite the fact that (b) entails (a), and therefore *cannot* be more likely than (a). Furthermore, Tversky and Kahneman reported similar rates of calibration violations in several other variations of the experiment. These findings have been replicated in lecture rooms ever since.

What is distinctive to philosophy, though, is the recalcitrant nature of the calibration problems it deals with. Recognition that φ entails ψ is enough in most contexts for reasonable people to change their credence in either φ or ψ (if they previously thought the former was more likely than the latter). Tversky and Kahneman [ibid.:95] report that subjects who commit the conjunction fallacy will generally, when debriefed, quickly admit their error. In philosophy, by contrast, having the entailment pointed out tends to prompt perplexity rather than credence adjustment.

Moreover, philosophers offer distinctive kinds of solutions to calibration problems, solutions that seek, *inter alia*, to explain this puzzlement once the entailment is revealed— that is, to explain why we were so confident of φ or why we were so unsure of ψ. Yablo [2017: 5] notes that 'a tempting answer, or answer type, on the φ side is this: we were overly confident of φ because we heard it as making a weaker, or anyway different, claim φ*, from which ψ did not follow'. The challenge is to articulate this claim φ* and to explain in a satisfying way—a way that does not involve special pleading or wishful thinking—why φ* tends to be confused with φ.

One very natural suggestion is to claim that all utterances of φ are understood as claims of the form ***if ψ, then*** *φ*—or something similar. Call such a position 'if/thenism.' Advocates of if/thenism thus have a straightforward paraphrase of φ that does not imply ψ. But the advocate of if/thenism must say much more about how we should understand the conditional in their paraphrase if the account is to be satisfactory. Yablo, in his penetrating

lead article, explains why classical and orthodox construals of if/thenism fail, and mounts an illuminating and persuasive case to the effect that advocates of if/thenism should understand 'if ψ, then φ' as the logical subtraction of ψ from φ. How persuasive one finds Yablo's case will depend on how persuasive one finds the twelve excellent commentaries that follow, all of which challenge different aspects of that case.

Acknowledgements

References

Tversky, A., and D. Kahneman 1982. Judgements of and by Representativeness, in *Judgement Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*, ed. D. Kahneman, P. Slovic, and A. Tversky, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 84–98.

Yablo, S. 2017. If-Thenism, *Australasian Philosophical Review* 1/2: 1–17.