Bayesianism & Explanationism

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There are two main kinds of epistemic requirements. First, let's examine these in the case of full (all-or-nothing) belief.

- **Correctness Requirements** (for full belief)
  - If p is false, then believing that p is incorrect.
  - Correctness requirements are *factive* — they involve relations between one's attitudes and *the facts* [32, 26, 33].
- **Rational Requirements** (for full belief)
  - If one believes both p and $\neg p$, then one's beliefs are *structurally* irrational (*viz.*, *incoherent*).
  - If one's total evidence K counter-supports p, then believing that p is *substantively* irrational.
  - Rational requirements are *non-factive* — they involve **either** (a) relations (of coherence) among one's attitudes (*structural* rationality) **or** (b) relations between one's total evidence K and one's attitudes (*substantive* rationality) [34].

This distinction also applies to Bayesian epistemology…

Let us suppose that our agent is equipped with a *confidence ordering* $\succeq$ over propositions. So that $p \succeq q$ iff S is *at least as confident* in the truth of p as in the truth of q.

And, $p \succ q$ iff S is *strictly more confident* in p than in q.

- **Correctness Requirements** (for comparative confidence)
  - If p is false and q is true, then $p \succ q$ is incorrect.
    - Heuristically, correctness requirements involve *agreement with the attitudes of an omniscient agent* [17, 14, 23].
- **Rational Requirements** (for comparative confidence)
  - Intransitive $\succeq$ relations are *structurally* irrational. *E.g.*, the *combination* of attitudes $\{p \succ q, q \succ r, r \succ p\}$ is *incoherent*.
  - If one's total evidence K supports p strictly more strongly than K supports q, then $q \succeq p$ is *substantively* irrational.

Bayesians also like to talk about *numerical degrees of confidence* (credences). Indeed, this will be our main focus today…

Let us suppose that our agent has (at each time t) *degrees of confidence* (*credences*) represented by a function $\mathrm{cr}_t(\cdot)$.

The function $\mathrm{cr}_t(\cdot \mid E)$ will reflect the agent's degrees of confidence (at t) — *on the indicative supposition that* E is true.

Finally, suppose our agent learns (exactly) E (with certainty) between t_0 and t_1. So, her transition from $\mathrm{cr}_{t_0}(\cdot)$ to $\mathrm{cr}_{t_1}(\cdot)$ reflects the upshot of learning (precisely) the content E.

Structural Bayesianism involves a Trinity of Requirements [27].

1. **Synchronic (Non-Suppositional) Probabilism.** At each time t, the agent's (non-suppositional) credence function $\mathrm{cr}_t(\cdot)$ should obey the (Komlogorov) probability axioms.
2. **Synchronic (Suppositional) Ratio Formula.** At each time t, the agent's (suppositional) credence function $\mathrm{cr}_t(\cdot \mid E)$ should obey the ratio formula $\mathrm{cr}_t(\cdot \mid E) = \frac{\mathrm{cr}_t(\cdot \& E)}{\mathrm{cr}_t(E)}$.
3. **Diachronic Conditionalization.** $\mathrm{cr}_{t_1}(\cdot)$ should equal $\frac{\mathrm{cr}_{t_0}(\cdot \& E)}{\mathrm{cr}_{t_0}(E)}$.

The Fourth Pillar of Structural Bayesianism *follows from* (1)–(3).

4. **Learning & Supposing.** $\mathrm{cr}_{t_1}(\cdot)$ should equal $\mathrm{cr}_{t_0}(\cdot \mid E)$.

de Finetti [3] gave Dutch Book Arguments for both (1) and (2).

Accuracy-dominance arguments for (1) are now popular [23]. One can also give an accuracy-dominance argument for (2) [11].

Lewis and others have aimed to adapt de Finetti's argument for (2) into a "diachronic Dutch Book" argument for (3) [24].

Like de Finetti, I view (1) and (2) as the *fundamental* Bayesian principles governing the (structural) rationality of credences.

I have always been more skeptical about the existence and nature of "diachronic coherence requirements." Indeed, there seem to be *many* reasons to worry about (3) & (4) [12, 35, 28].

I will focus, primarily, on the synchronic requirements (1) & (2), and how they (allegedly) interact with Explanationism.

There are also *substantive* Bayesian requirements. In general, these are of the following generic form: If one's total evidence at time t (K_t) is such and so, then $\mathrm{cr}_t(\cdot)$ should be thus and such.

Let $\{H_1, \dots, H_n\}$ be some partition of alternative hypotheses (putative explanations of E) entertained by an agent (at time t).

Substantive Bayesianism (some example requirements)

- **The Principle of Indifference** [8]. If K_t does not favor any H_i over any H_j, then $\mathrm{cr}_t(H_i)$ should equal $\mathrm{cr}_t(H_j)$, $\forall\ i, j$.
- **The Principal Principle** [20]. If K_t entails that the objective chance of H_i is c (and K_t doesn't contain/imply any inadmissible evidence), then $\mathrm{cr}_t(H_i)$ should equal c.
- **The Requirement of Total Evidence** [18, 1, 33]. $\mathrm{cr}_t(H_i)$ should be equal to the evidential probability $\Pr(H_i \mid K_t)$.

Next up: Explanationism. I will follow Douven's [5] recent discussion of (the various explications of) Explanationism.

As Douven [5] explains, there have been various historical views regarding the proper formulation of Explanationism.

Rather than rehearsing Douven's list of historical explications in detail, I will remain at a higher level of abstraction.

☞ The idea behind *Explanationism* is that some "epistemic credit" should accrue to a hypothesis H in virtue of its being the best (or only) explanation of E (among the available alternatives $\{H_k\}$).

The question in which I am interested is: What is the best way to accommodate this basic Explanationist idea — of "credit" accruing to E's best explanation — *within a Bayesian framework*?

van Fraassen [30] and Douven [5] maintain that a Bayesian should incorporate Explanationism *by revising some of the basic requirements of Structural Bayesianism: (1)–(3).*

Before we delve into that dialectic, I must digress, briefly, to discuss an important argument that's in the background here.

Some authors [21, 22] argue that explanatory considerations (to the extent they are epistemically relevant) are *automatically* taken into account by Bayesianism, which requires that, for all t,

Bayes's Theorem. $\mathrm{cr}_t(H \mid E) \propto \mathrm{cr}_t(E \mid H) \times \mathrm{cr}_t(H)$

Some terminology: $\mathrm{cr}_t(H \mid E)$ is called the *posterior* probability of H (relative to E), $\mathrm{cr}_t(E \mid H)$ is called the *likelihood* of H (relative to E), and $\mathrm{cr}_t(H)$ is called the *prior* probability of H.

So, to the extent that explanatory considerations are relevant to the determination of the posterior, they must *already* be captured *either* by the likelihood *or* by the prior (*or both*).

Typically, it is said that the likelihood captures *relational explanatory virtues* of H, *vis-à-vis* E (*e.g.*, how well H accounts for/fits E), while the prior captures *non-relational* (or intrinsic) explanatory/theoretical virtues of H (*e.g.*, simplicity).

☞ **The Double-Counting Argument** (DCA) argues that giving "epistemic credit" to best explanations is *double-counting*.

Douven recommends that Bayesians *revise the Ratio Formula* (2) in such a way that the following alternative to Bayes's Theorem is adopted (for hypotheses $H_i \in \{H_1, \ldots, H_n\}$ and evidence E).

EXPL. $$\mathrm{cr}_t(H_i \mid E) = \frac{\mathrm{cr}_t(H_i) \cdot \mathrm{cr}_t(E \mid H_i) + \mathfrak{c}(H_i, E)}{\sum_{k=1}^{n} [\mathrm{cr}_t(H_k) \cdot \mathrm{cr}_t(E \mid H_k) + \mathfrak{c}(H_k, E)]},$$

where $\mathfrak{c}(H, E) \in [0, 1)$ is H's "E-abductive credit score." And, $\mathfrak{c}(H, E) > 0$ *iff* H *best explains* E (o.w. $\mathfrak{c}(H, E) = 0$).[1]

Note that *if there is no best explanation* of E among the $\{H_k\}$, then **EXPL** *reduces to Bayes's Theorem* (since all of the credit scores $\mathfrak{c}(H_k, E)$ will be equal to zero in such a case).

Because **EXPL** leads to violations of Structural Bayesianism [*viz.*, (2)], Douven discusses various ways a defender of **EXPL** might respond to de Finetti's [3] Dutch Book argument for (2).

[1] This definition can't be quite right, since $\mathfrak{c}(H, E)$ will need to be $\gg 1$ for some Bayesian updates. But, this is a minor, fixable technical problem.

☞ There is a more elegant way to capture the idea of "abductive credit," which avoids the probabilistic incoherencies of [5, 30].

Note that there is something odd about thinking of **EXPL** as a *structural* requirement in the first place. **EXPL** has this form:

EXPL. $\mathrm{cr}_t(H_i \mid E)$ should receive a boost — over and above the value prescribed by Bayes's Theorem — just in case ($\mathbb{A}_i$) H_i is the best explanation of E (among the $\{H_k\}$).

On its face, **EXPL** relates $\mathrm{cr}_t(H_i \mid E)$ to ***the fact*** that H_i best explains E, which would make **EXPL** a *correctness* requirement.

In order for **EXPL** to be a *structural* requirement, it would have to be stated *as a relation among the agent's credences*. To wit:

EXPL$_1$. $\mathrm{cr}_t(H_i \mid E)$ should receive a boost — over & above its Bayes's Thm value — iff ***the agent is certain at*** t ***that*** $\mathbb{A}_i$.[2]

[2] We also have to be careful to allow this "boost" to occur *only once* — presumably, when $\mathbb{A}_i$ is *first learned*. Otherwise, H_i will be "over-boosted."

Even **EXPL$_1$** is arguably not a (pure) structural requirement, since it only constrains agents who *entertain* $\mathbb{A}_i$, for some H_i and E.

Pure structural requirements (*e.g.*, probabilism) do not presuppose anything about the *contents* of an agent's attitudes.

☞ If **EXPL** is going to be a (non-vacuous) *rational* requirement, then it must presuppose that the agent *entertains* $\mathbb{A}_i$, for some H_i and E. And, in that case, I think a preferable explication exists.

Evidential Relevance of Abduction (ERA). Let $\mathbb{A}_j$ assert that H_j is the best (or, better still, the *only* [4, 9]) explanation of E (among the available $\{H_k\}$). Then, it is — in *some* cases — *rationally required* that an agent's credence function at t_0 be such that

$$\mathrm{cr}_{t_0}(H_j \mid E \,\&\, \mathbb{A}_j) > \mathrm{cr}_{t_0}(H_j \mid E \,\&\, \neg\mathbb{A}_j).$$

Alternatively, let $\mathbb{A}(H_i, H_j, E) \overset{\text{def}}{=} H_j$ is a *better explanation* of E than H_i is. And, then explicate **ERA** in terms of *favoring* [10].

Supposing E (at t_0), $\mathbb{A}(H_i, H_j, E)$ *favors* H_j *over* H_i.

I'm not the first one to propose something like **ERA**. Climenhaga, Hartmann *et. al.*, Lange, and Weisberg have all argued convincingly for similar principles [2, 19, 31, 4, 15, 9].

Roche & Sober [25] agree that **ERA** is the right *formulation* of Explanationism; but, they argue that **ERA** is *false* — *viz.*, that $\mathbb{A}_j$ is *never* relevant to H_j (on the supposition of the evidence E).

I think Climenhaga [2] and Lange [19] do a pretty good job of responding to Roche & Sober's skeptical argument [25].

The main thing I would add to Climenhaga's and Lange's trenchant responses Roche & Sober is the following point.

☞ In order to refute R&S's skepticism, all that is required is *a single example* in which $\mathbb{A}_j$ *is* relevant to H_j (given E).

I will close by discussing just such an example (involving Newton, Einstein, and the motion of Mercury), which is a well-known instance of The Problem of Old Evidence [6, 13, 16].

Let $E \overset{\text{def}}{=}$ the precession of the perihelion of Mercury $\approx 574''/\text{cy}$. Note that E had long been known by $t_1 = 1914$.[3]

Let $H_1 \overset{\text{def}}{=}$ Newton's theory of planetary motion, and $H_2 \overset{\text{def}}{=}$ Einstein's theory of general relativity. This yields the following 3-element partition of hypotheses: $\{H_1, H_2, H_3 = \neg H_1 \,\&\, \neg H_2\}$.

If **ERA** applies in this case, then our agent should be such that

$$\mathrm{cr}_{t_0}(H_2 \mid E \,\&\, \mathbb{A}_2) > \mathrm{cr}_{t_0}(H_2 \mid E \,\&\, \neg\mathbb{A}_2).$$

Thus, after E was learned (between t_0 and t_1), we should have

$$\mathrm{cr}_{t_1}(H_2 \mid \mathbb{A}_2) > \mathrm{cr}_{t_1}(H_2 \mid \neg\mathbb{A}_2).$$

When $\mathbb{A}_2$ was subsequently learned in $t_2 = 1915$ [29, 7], *it* — and *not E*, which was *old evidence* — provided a boost to H_2 [15, 9].

[3] For simplicity, I will assume that $t_0 = 1913$ in my reconstruction of the case. But, in fact, E was already known in 1882, when Newcomb calculated the Newtonian discrepancy in Mercury's perihelion precession precisely [29].

How would **EXPL**$_1$ handle this Old Evidence Problem?

Let us suppose that our agent became certain of $\mathbb{A}_2$ in $t_2 = 1915$.

Then, according to **EXPL**$_1$, H_2 receives a "positive credit score" [$\mathfrak{c}(H_2, E) > 0$] and a boost in credence (at t_2) — over and above what Bayes's Thm would recommend. Hence, **EXPL**$_1$ yields

$$\mathrm{cr}_{t_2}(H_2 \mid E) > \mathrm{cr}_{t_2}(H_2).$$

In this sense, according to **EXPL**$_1$, *E confirms H_2 in 1915*.

☞ I see (at least) two problems with this application of **EXPL**$_1$.

- It is *misleading* to say that E is what confirms H_2 in 1915. It is $\mathbb{A}_2$ — by ensuring $\mathfrak{c}(H_2, E) > 0$ — that is doing the work.
- In addition to the machinery of probability theory [modulo (2)], Douven also needs a "theory of credit scores." In this sense, the (Bayesian) **ERA** approach is *more parsimonious*.

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