Reasoning without Blinders: A Reply to Valaris

Sinan Dogramaci

The University of Texas at Austin

sinan.dogramaci@gmail.com

Abstract: I object to Markos Valaris's thesis that reasoning requires a belief that your conclusion follows from your premisses. My counter-examples highlight the important but neglected role of suppositional reasoning in the basis of so much of what we know.

Markos Valaris defends this thesis: in order for you to genuinely *reason* from believed premiss(es) *R* to a conclusion *p*, you need to also believe that your conclusion, *p*, *follows* from your premiss(es), *R*. Valaris is also open to a slightly weaker thesis where you only need be *disposed* to believe *p* follows from *R* (believing it if you consider the matter). Valaris defines his use of 'follows' thus: '*p* follows from *R* … just in case *R* constitutes *conclusive evidence* for *p*, i.e. just in case *R* justifies *outright belief* in—and potentially knowledge of—*p*.' (p.2; page references are to the *Advanced Access* online publication; doi: 10.1093/mind/fzu045)

Valaris's main concern is to resist regress arguments for blind reasoning. By 'blind reasoning', I mean reasoning that does not involve your having any belief that your reasoning's conclusion follows from your basis (see Valaris, p.25; also Boghossian 2003 and Wittgenstein 1953, §219). Regress arguments for blind reasoning are inspired by Carroll 1895. I do not endorse regress arguments for blind reasoning. But, there is a second, completely distinct argument for blind reasoning. The argument is simple, but Valaris and others miss it because they focus too much attention on Modus Ponens, ignoring other elementary forms of reasoning.

To introduce the argument, consider how we know this material conditional: if the Liar is and is not true, then I'm a monkey's uncle (literally). I know this conditional, but I do not know it non-inferentially. Learning it requires some reasoning. One way to learn conditionals like this is using reasoning by *ex falso quodlibet*, also called explosion. Although some non-classicists reject such reasoning, it is hard to reject it, since the reasoning only involves elementary steps. First, I make a supposition: suppose the Liar is and is not true. Under this supposition, the Liar is true (by conjunction elimination). And then either the Liar is true or I'm a monkey's uncle (by disjunction introduction). But, since the Liar is not true (by conjunction elimination again), then

I'm a monkey's uncle (by disjunctive syllogism). Now lifting the supposition, I can come to know (by conditional proof) that if the Liar is and is not true, I'm a monkey's uncle. (For another example illustrating how substantial inferential knowledge may be based just on a bit of suppositional reasoning, consider any instance of this distributive law: [h∨(i&j)]→[(h∨i)&(h∨j)].)

A tremendous amount of what we know by reasoning, we know on the basis of bits of suppositional reasoning. Sometimes a conclusion's sole basis is a bit of suppositional reasoning, as it may in reasoning by conditional proof, or *reductio ad absurdum*. Sometimes the basis includes both premisses and suppositional reasoning, as it must in reasoning by cases, also called disjunction elimination. (This is how we know that the next US president will be someone rich, whether it is the Democrat or the Republican.) If we restrict our attention to pieces of reasoning that have premisses for their entire basis, then we restrict our attention to one narrow and dangerously unrepresentative class of reasoning. Valaris indicates that he wants his thesis to apply to reasoning *generally*.[1] However, Valaris only considers reasoning that is based only on premisses. Even if his arguments against blind reasoning look convincing when we focus only on that narrow area, the case for non-blind basic reasoning loses plausibility when we see that it cannot be generally correct.

It indeed cannot be. In reasoning toward the conclusion that I'm a monkey's uncle if the Liar is and is not true, I never form any belief about my conclusion *following* from anything. Valaris uses '*p* follows from *R*' to mean *R* is conclusive evidence for *p*, or *R* justifies *outright belief* in *p*. But what *fact,* or what *proposition*, is evidence that—or justifies belief that—I'm a monkey's uncle if the Liar is and is not true? I do not see one.

Could Valaris reply, insisting that I must believe my conclusion follows from nothing? If 'nothing' means 'no evidence', then the view would be that, given no evidence, I have

---

1 The first sentence of Valaris's conclusion, p.24, is, 'In this paper I have argued that, contrary to contemporary orthodoxy, knowledge by reasoning requires knowledge of what follows from what.' On p.1, the abstract ends with this sentence: 'I propose an alternative account, according to which beliefs about what follows from what play a constitutive role in reasoning.'. The main section of the paper, sect. 4, is titled 'An account of reasoning'. See also pp.3, 6, 11-12. And see fn.10 on p.8 where Valaris says the non-blindness view requires 'deep explanation.', and see Valaris's comments on 'arguing for a conception of reasoning' on p.14

On p.25, in his final paragraph, Valaris asserts this generalization in particular: 'There is no such thing as blind reasoning, and—given the failure of the regress argument—neither is there any need for it'.

And on p.12, when transitioning after discussing the case of non-basic reasoning, Valaris writes: 'Our business is not done yet, however, because non-basic reasoning cannot be all the reasoning there is.' Valaris rightly appreciates the need for a general and unified account of reasoning.

conclusive evidence that I'm a monkey's uncle if the Liar is and is not true. That sounds oxymoronic. If 'nothing' means 'just my current evidence', then the view seems trivial: few will deny that, for *any* belief of mine, say my belief that *p*, I should be prepared (if I consider the matter) to also believe that my belief that *p* is conclusively justified by my current total evidence.

Could Valaris retreat and at least maintain that even when one reasons toward a conditional by conditional proof, the reasoning is still non-blind in the following sense: the reasoner must believe that the consequent of the conditional *follows* from its antecedent? My example shows why this will not work. That the Liar is and is not true does not constitute *evidence* or *justify outright belief* that I'm a monkey's uncle.

Could Valaris retreat further, at least maintaining that reasoning by Modus Ponens is non-blind while conceding that we reason blindly when we reason by conditional proof, *reductio ad absurdum*, reasoning by cases, and any other types of reasoning where the conclusion is based on suppositional reasoning? If Valaris retreats that far back, then he no longer has an answer to his most interesting question: 'what exactly does good reasoning consist in'? (p.1) He no longer contributes to our having an explanatory—a unified and general—theory of reasoning. He can no longer say, 'We can construct a coherent and plausible account of reasoning in which beliefs about what follows from what play an indispensable role.' (p.6). Some reasoning dispenses with such beliefs.

Could Valaris extend his stated view in a way that would allow him to give a unified and general account of reasoning? A referee suggests that Valaris might be able to do so by appealing to the notion of conditional belief, an attitude that relates a thinker to a pair of propositions, in a way that is irreducible to ordinary, unconditional belief. The suggested view says that, in reasoning by conditional proof, the basis of the inferred conditional is a conditional belief. So, could Valaris perhaps extend his main thesis in a natural way by saying that, when you reason by conditional proof, you must believe that your inferred conclusion (a conditional that you end up unconditionally believing) follows from a conditional belief you had (where this is something like a belief in the consequent, conditional on the antecedent)?

With Wedgwood (2013), Edgington (1995) and Lewis (1976), I do favor the inclusion of irreducibly conditional attitudes in our psychological and epistemological theories. However,

conditional attitudes do not provide a resource that will allow us to extend Valaris's view to account for inferences like conditional proof or *reductio*. The immediate problem is this. Valaris's view is that 'beliefs about what follows from what play a constitutive role in reasoning' (p.1), and his understanding of the notion of *following* is that '*p* follows from *R* … just in case *R* constitutes *conclusive evidence* for *p*, i.e. just in case *R* justifies *outright belief* in—and potentially knowledge of—*p*.' (p.2). This view requires that reasoners grasp some *content* that plays the role of evidence for a conclusion, or justifies belief in a conclusion. Introducing the new *psychological* notion of conditional belief does not introduce the sort of thing that Valaris's view requires, namely a content that supports the conditional that is being inferred by conditional proof. Again, what is the believed or known evidence for 'If the Liar is and is not true, then I'm a monkey's uncle'? The psychological state of conditional belief provides no answer to this question.

Valaris, like many philosophers writing on these topics, takes on methodological risks by focusing largely on Modus Ponens. He is aware of this, writing: 'Of course, it is recognized that sometimes reasoning may instead reinforce an existing belief, or lead one to abandon it. Furthermore, sometimes we reason hypothetically, i.e. without commitment to the truth either of our premisses or of our conclusion; and sometimes we trace inferential relations via schematic arguments, which lack determinate premisses or conclusion altogether. It is unlikely that any of these cases introduce significant new issues, however, so most authors do not discuss them directly. I will follow the same practice.' (p.3) Even in that list, Valaris does not mention the type of reasoning that I have discussed, reasoning toward a *believed* conclusion on the basis of no premiss, only a piece of suppositional reasoning. That type of reasoning does raise significant new issues and undermines Valaris's thesis.

References

Boghossian, Paul 2003: 'Blind Reasoning'. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume,* 77, pp. 225–48.

Carroll, Lewis 1895: 'What the Tortoise Said to Achilles'. *Mind*, 4, pp. 278–80.

Casullo, Albert and Joshua C. Thurow (eds) 2013: *The A Priori in Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Edgington, Dorothy 1995: 'On Conditionals'. *Mind,* 104, pp. 235–329.
Lewis, David 1976: 'Probabilities of Conditionals and Conditional Probabilities'. *The Philosophical Review*, 85, pp. 297–315.
Valaris, Markos [published online 2014]: 'Reasoning and Regress'. *Mind*, [doi: 10.1093/mind/fzu045]
Wedgwood, Ralph 2013: '*A Priori* Bootstrapping', in Casullo and Thurow 2013, pp. 226–46.
Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1953: *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.