

BEALER ON THE AUTONOMY OF PHILOSOPHICAL AND SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

MICHAEL J. SHAFFER

Abstract: In a series of influential articles, George Bealer argues for the autonomy of philosophical knowledge on the basis that philosophically known truths must be necessary truths. The main point of his argument is that the truths investigated by the sciences are contingent truths to be discovered a posteriori by observation, while the truths of philosophy are necessary truths to be discovered a priori by intuition. The project of assimilating philosophy to the sciences is supposed to be rendered illegitimate by the more or less sharp distinction in these characteristic methods and its modal basis. In this article Bealer's particular way of drawing the distinction between philosophy and science is challenged in a novel manner, and thereby philosophical naturalism is further defended.

Keywords: Bealer, naturalism, rationalism, philosophical methodology, counterfactuals, ideal reasoning.

1. Introduction

In a series of influential articles (Bealer 1987, 1992, 1996a, 1996b, 1999, and 2002), George Bealer argues for the autonomy of philosophical knowledge on the basis that philosophically known truths must be necessary truths. He puts the matter this way: "In being interested in such things as the nature of mind, intelligence, the virtues, and life, philosophers do not want to know what those things just happen to be, but rather what those things must be" (1987, 289). Perhaps more revealingly he claims that philosophers "are not interested in such questions as the nature of water, heat, lemon, arthritis or the distinction between beech and elm. These questions belong to empirical science, and philosophers are not, as philosophers, typically interested in them" (289). Moreover, of science he claims: "No such necessity ever holds for science. No matter how good the cognitive conditions, it is always possible that scientific theories arrived at in those conditions are largely mistaken" (1996a, 131).

The main point expressed in these passages is that the truths investigated by the sciences are contingent truths to be discovered a posteriori by

observation, while the truths of philosophy are necessary truths to be discovered a priori by intuition. The project of assimilating philosophy to the sciences is supposed to be rendered illegitimate by the more or less sharp distinction in these characteristic methods and its modal basis. Here Bealer's particular way of drawing the distinction between philosophy and science will be challenged in a novel manner, and thereby philosophical naturalism will be further defended.

2. Bealer's Modal-Autonomy Argument

In order to assess Bealer's modal-autonomy argument against philosophical naturalism it will be useful to present it in a more formal manner. Where $\Box p$ is the necessary truth of p , $K_p p$ is the statement that p is known philosophically, $K_s p$ is the statement that p is known scientifically, W is the set of all possible worlds, w_i is world i , and w_a is the actual world, a very strong version of Bealer's modal-autonomy argument can be given as follows:

- P1: $(\forall p)(K_p p \supset \Box p)$.
 P2: $(\forall p)(\Box p \supset W \models p)$.
 P3: $(\forall p)(K_s p \supset (w_a \models p \ \& \ (\exists w_i) \neg(w_i \models p)))$.
 P4: $(\forall p)((w_a \models p \ \& \ (\exists w_i) \neg(w_i \models p)) \supset \neg(W \models p))$.
 $\therefore (\forall p)(K_p p \supset \neg K_s p)$.
 $\therefore (\forall p) \neg(K_s p \equiv K_p p)$.

P1 will be referred to here as the principle of the necessity of philosophical knowledge, or NPK. P2 is a rather uncontroversial (partial) analysis of the meaning of necessity in terms of possible-worlds semantics.¹ P3 will be referred to as the principle of the contingency of scientific knowledge, or CSK. P4, as with P2, is the rather uncontroversial statement that if p is a contingent truth, then it is not a necessary truth framed in terms of possible-worlds semantics. As should then be obvious, the real work in Bealer's modal argument is done by NPK and CSK.

The fact that philosophical knowledge is necessary and that scientific knowledge is contingent is used by Bealer to show that philosophical knowledge and scientific knowledge are essentially different. As they are different in this respect, Bealer predictably argues that the manner in which the former and the latter are acquired must be different. Philosophical knowledge is supposed to be based on the use of a priori intuition, a reliable belief-forming process with respect to modal truths.² Scientific knowledge is supposed to be based on the use of a posteriori observation,

¹ Possible-world semantics is used here only in a heuristic sense. For a discussion of one critical problem with that view and why it should not be adopted literally, see Shaffer and Morris 2006.

² See Bealer 1996a and 2000.

a generally less reliable belief-forming process with respect to contingent truths.³

Despite his offering this sort of argument, Bealer is nevertheless careful to back away from the strong modal argument for the autonomy of philosophy. In “A Priori Knowledge and the Scope of Philosophy” he carefully defines a weakened sense of the autonomy of philosophy as follows: “Among the central questions of philosophy that can be answered by one standard theoretical means or another, *most* can in principle be answered by philosophical investigation and argument without relying substantively on the sciences” (1996a, 121; my italics). The reasons for his falling back to this weaker position seem to be rather obvious, and they appear to amount to nothing more than his recognizing that CSK, in being excessively strong, would have been more easily refuted. More specifically, as we shall see, CSK might be refuted by the possibility of scientific essentialism. As a result, a slightly more plausible, weakened, version of the modal-autonomy argument can be given as follows. Where $(\exists \int p)(\dots Fp \dots)$ is understood to be the claim that most ps are F :

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Q1: } & (\exists \int p)(K_p p \supset \Box p). \\ \text{Q2: } & (\forall p)(\Box p \supset W \models p). \\ \text{Q3: } & (\exists \int p)(K_s p \supset (w_a \models p \ \& \ (\exists w_i)(w_i \models p))). \\ \text{Q4: } & (\forall p)((w_a \models p \ \& \ (\exists w_i)(w_i \models p)) \supset \neg(W \models p)). \\ \therefore & (\exists \int p)(K_p p \supset \neg K_s p). \\ \therefore & (\exists \int p)\neg(K_s p \equiv K_p p). \end{aligned}$$

The idea here is that *most* philosophical knowledge is autonomous from science because most philosophical knowledge is knowledge of necessary truths, whereas at least most of the truths of science are contingent.⁴

3. Analysis of Bealer’s Modal-Autonomy Arguments

Despite the obvious appeal that Bealer’s arguments might have in preserving some special privileged corner of the domain of inquiry as the exclusive province of philosophers, they are unsound. They are unsound, however, for additional reasons that are different from those that have typically been indicated. The standard objection to Bealer’s strong modal-autonomy argument challenges CSK by pointing out that

³ This is how Bealer (1996a, 1996b) establishes the authority of philosophy. Where some truth can be known either philosophically or scientifically, the philosophical knowledge of that truth will always be more secure.

⁴ In dealing with the charge of scientific essentialism, Bealer (1996a) entertains the possibility that scientific methods may be needed to establish the truth, a posteriori, of some necessary truths, but that in establishing the truth of all significant *philosophical* claims, those that involve what Bealer calls semantically stable terms, no such methods are needed.

some necessary truths, for example, natural-kind identities, are only knowable a posteriori on the basis of scientific observation. Such objections, of course, owe their origin to the work of Kripke (1980) and Putnam (1975).

In any case, observation-based a posteriori science is supposed to be needed in order to establish the truth of some claims, for example, the claims that water is H₂O or that mental states are brain states. Both of these claims are supposed to be necessarily true if true, and presumably can only be known a posteriori. This challenge to the strong modal-autonomy argument, the possibility of *scientific essentialism*, has been attacked repeatedly by Bealer (1996a, 1999), and he apparently takes it to be the only serious impediment to his project of defending the autonomy of philosophy against the prevailing inclination to naturalize that discipline. His argument against scientific essentialism is simply that scientific essentialism holds only for semantically unstable terms, those that could mean something different for a language group whose epistemic circumstances were qualitatively identical to ours.⁵ We are told, however, that most philosophical problems remain untouched in light of the introduction of scientific essentialism, because philosophical problems involve semantically stable terms and scientific essentialism does not apply to problems involving this significant class of terms.

Whatever the merits of this objection and whatever the merits of Bealer's responses to this objection, it is not all that can be said in the way of criticism of Bealer's modal-autonomy argument. In what follows it will be shown, *pace* Bealer, that NPK is false in both forms and hence that both modal-autonomy arguments are unsound *even if Bealer's response to the challenge of scientific essentialism is successful*. Bealer's attempt to draw a distinction between philosophical knowledge and scientific knowledge on the basis of modal differences faces not one but two serious challenges. However, while the challenge posed by scientific essentialism has at least been addressed and perhaps even avoided by Bealer (1996a, 1999), he has given no such response with respect to *philosophical anti-essentialism*, the contention that philosophy trades in establishing a certain significant class of contingent truths.

4. Rejecting NPK

How might one go about rejecting NPK and the modal-autonomy arguments? All that would seemingly be required in order for one to do so, at least in the case of the strong modal-autonomy argument, would be to provide a single case where philosophical methods lead to the establishing of a contingent truth. But this would not be sufficient to

⁵ See Bealer 1996a and 1987.

do the job fully, because we saw that in offering the weakened modal-autonomy argument Bealer hedged his claim concerning the *absolute* autonomy of philosophy. About philosophical problems he states only that “*most* can in principle be answered by philosophical investigation without relying substantively on the sciences” (1996a, 121; my italics). What must be shown, then, if we are to reject the weakened modal-autonomy argument, is that there is a significant class of *characteristically philosophical* problems that admit only of contingent answers. According to Bealer (1996a), characteristically philosophical problems will then be those that involve semantically stable terms, that is, terms that cannot possibly mean something different for a language community in an epistemic situation qualitatively identical to ours. Such semantically stable terms are (importantly) alleged to include “believe,” “reason,” “evidence,” “justify,” “explain,” “ought,” and so on. Showing that there is a significant class of characteristically philosophical problems involving these sorts of terms that admit only of contingent answers will be the main focus of the following sections.

4.1 *Ideal Cases in Philosophy*

The basis on which the weakened version of NPK will be challenged involves the contentions, first, that much of philosophical reasoning concerning supposedly semantically stable terms involves reasoning about ideal cases and, second, that due to their logical form these claims cannot be necessary truths. If these contentions are true, then there is a significant class of philosophical problems that admit only of contingent answers, and so this class of problems serves as a significant class of counterexamples to NPK, even in the weakened form that appears in Bealer’s weakened modal-autonomy argument.

In pursuit of this end, much that is of great use can be learned from Kant, particularly from looking at Kant’s moral philosophy as discussed by Robert Holmes (2003). Holmes emphasizes the familiar points that Kantian maxims are categorical in nature and that they concern the conduct of fully rational beings. So, for example, a fully rational being would not lie, even though actual ethical agents frequently do. Moreover, this is not intended to be a merely conditional claim like principles of rationality that concern skills or prudential matters. So Kantian ethical imperatives are not statements of mere instrumental rationality that concern ethical matters. In fact, they are in some sense ultimate principles the denial of which involves one or more forms of inconsistency. Holmes, however, points out that when we understand Kant in this way, we find that the normativity involved in such principles is supposed to be secured by appeal to reasoning in the following sort of characteristic manner:

K1: A fully rational being would do X.
 ∴ K2: An imperfectly rational being ought to do X.

K3: I am an imperfectly rational being.
 \therefore K4: I ought to do X. (See 2003, 114–23)

But two problems arise when we reflect on this sort of argument sequence. First, as Holmes notes, in order to be rendered valid such arguments would need to be supplemented with an additional premise stating that one ought to do what fully rational agents do (2003, 123). Second, the problem that then arises is that of determining the conduct of a fully rational and purely hypothetical agent.

What we must crucially be able to determine is the relevant behavior of an ideal counterpart of ourselves. It is of no use to us to posit a maxim describing the behavior of an ideal agent where that ideal agent is ideal *but not ideal relative to us*. So it would seem that the problem of determining what standard of conduct we ought follow in a given set of circumstances can be solved by specifying a true counterfactual that describes the behavior of an agent who is ideal in some relevant respect(s) and that counterfactually links our behavior to the behavior of such an ideal agent. *In doing so such counterfactuals provide us with norms of conduct*. Understanding ideal-case reasoning in this manner appears to solve Holmes's initial worry as well. The additional premise needed to get the argument sequence K1–K4 to go through is secured in virtue of the observation that our ideal counterparts are more *perfect* than we are, and so we ought to act like them *because* they are more perfect versions of us. What we can usefully learn from this interpretation of Kantian ethical methodology is that ideal-case reasoning like this is common in ethics and that it is essentially counterfactual in nature. Such reasoning, however, also occurs frequently in epistemology and elsewhere in philosophy. Consider such crucial but characteristic epistemological contentions as the one that follows, where JB_{ap} asserts that *a* justifiably believes that *p*:

(Closure) For all *p* and *q*, if JB_{ap} and $JB_a(p \supset q)$, then JB_aq .

The debate about the appropriateness of accepting this particular epistemic norm, the closure principle, into models of epistemic behavior has centered on two key issues: (1) the usefulness of this principle in challenging skepticism and (2) the plausibility of the principle itself as an epistemic norm relative to us.⁶ Whatever the merits of closure in the sense of (1), the real philosophical issue then is, to be sure, (2). For surely we cannot simply accept closure as being justified based on the *mere* contention that it provides for a potentially serious answer to the skeptic, as that would simply beg the question of the truth of closure itself.

So however desirable it would be to reject skepticism by rejecting closure, the argument that rejecting closure would allow some purchase

⁶ See, for example, Feldman 1995 and Audi 1995.

against skepticism alone cannot constitute a good reason for accepting closure as a component of an adequate model of an epistemic agent. As a result, what this particular characteristically philosophical debate is focused on is whether or not our ideal and, hence, abstract models of epistemic agents should be governed by closure and, thereby, whether we should accept closure as an epistemic norm with respect to actual epistemic agents. Actual agents' beliefs, however, are surely not closed in this manner, due to the fact that we possess only finite computational abilities and very limited memory resources. As a result, the real issue is one of whether or not such ideal agents are really our counterparts in close possible worlds.

So the real, more basic, issue in this particular philosophical debate is whether or not we ought to accept a specific version of the following sort of assertion:

(Ideal N -agent) Were agent a ideal in respect(s) I , then agent a 's beliefs would conform to principle N .

In the specific case of closure such a principle would take the following form:

(Ideal closure-agent) Were agent a possessed of infinite computational capacities and unlimited memory, then agent a 's beliefs would be closed under logical consequence such that for all p and q , if $JB_{a,p}$ and $JB_a(p \supset q)$, then $JB_{a,q}$.

All such claims are, of course, counterfactual in nature, as it is often the case that in specifying such epistemic norms the relevant conditions I are never met, and, in many similar cases, cannot be met. But, more important, many such claims cannot be necessarily true.

Assuming the standard analysis of counterfactuals, *ideal case counterfactuals* can be analyzed as follows:

(ICCF) $A \Box \rightarrow B$ is an ideal case counterfactual relative to world w_i , if and only if, $A \Box \rightarrow B$ is a counterfactual and w_i revised by the addition of A is relevantly more perfect than w_i .

Given ICCF, we can then specify that such claims have the following truth-conditions:

(ICCF-truth) $A \Box \rightarrow B$ is true at w_i , if and only if, B is true at the closest A -worlds to w_i .

In a relatively standard manner, we can then understand "closeness" in terms of a selection function that defines a preferred set of worlds. In the sorts of cases we have been discussing, like that of the ideal closure-agent

claim, those worlds picked out will be ones in which real epistemic agents have counterparts that are more epistemically or ethically ideal. In such worlds our counterparts will be better endowed with abilities and less impeded by interfering factors of the relevant sorts. As a result, unlike the standard semantics for non-ideal-case counterfactuals, where the closeness relation in a simple qualitative similarity relation, the selection function, or accessibility function, for ideal-case counterfactuals needs to pick out the closest worlds that are *perfectings* of the base world in question, and so the semantics of ideal counterfactuals involves a bit more structure than the corresponding semantics for ordinary counterfactuals; this is because worlds in this semantics have varying complexity and degrees of perfection.

Despite these technical details, it turns out that ideal-case counterfactuals are not necessary truths, for the following reasons. First, we should note that ideal N -agent claims are not strict conditionals of the form $A \Rightarrow B$, where $A \Rightarrow B \equiv \Box(A \supset B)$, because if they were then they would both contrapose and obey strengthening of the antecedent.⁷ They clearly do not, however, as, if they did, then in the case of the ideal closure-agent principle the following claim would, as a matter of logic, be true:

Were agent a 's beliefs not closed under logical consequence such that for all p and q , if JB_{ap} and $\text{JB}_a(p \supset q)$, then JB_{aq} , then agent a would not be possessed of infinite computational capacities and unlimited memory.

But this is surely not true, as a may be possessed of infinite computational capacities and unlimited memory and yet a 's beliefs may not be closed under implication for a variety of reasons, not least of which might be that a may happen to inhabit a demon world, that a may happen to exist only for a mere picosecond, and so on.

Such claims are not then strict conditionals, but might they nevertheless be necessarily true counterfactuals? If they were necessarily true counterfactuals, then they would have the following logical form, $\Box(A \Box \rightarrow B)$. If ideal N -agent claims took this form, then Bealer could seemingly avoid the threat of philosophical anti-essentialism, but they clearly cannot have this form, for the following reason. $\Box(A \Box \rightarrow B)$ is, of course, equivalent to $\neg \Diamond \neg(A \Box \rightarrow B)$, and if this really was necessarily a truth, then for all formulae ϕ , it should be the case that $(A \& \phi \Box \rightarrow B)$ as the truth of $(A \Box \rightarrow B)$ should not be contingent on any ϕ .⁸ But this principle, strengthening of the antecedent, notoriously fails for counter-

⁷ The reason they do not do so is, more basically, that such conditionals are not transitive. See Bennet 2003.

⁸ This is perhaps even more easily seen if we accept Stalnaker's rule, which asserts that $\neg(A \Box \rightarrow B) \equiv (A \Box \rightarrow \neg B)$.

factuals, and $(A \Box \rightarrow B)$ can be true, while it is false that $(A \& \phi \Box \rightarrow B)$ if any such ϕ exists. Thus, all statements of the form $(A \Box \rightarrow B)$ that are not equivalent to strict conditionals are not necessary truths, and many ideal N -agent claims have such defeaters.

Despite this point, the truth of ideal N -agent claims has been a matter of considerable philosophical debate in epistemology⁹ (and elsewhere), as anyone familiar with, for example, the exchanges concerning closure can attest to, and such substantive philosophical issues as the rejection of skepticism turn on our being able to accept or reject such principles. As noted above, the real philosophical issue in this particular case concerns whether we ought to accept the ideal closure-agent principle. Here, then, is where the really interesting point is to be found. If Bealer's NPK thesis is correct, even in its weakened form, and it turns out that ideal N -agent claims are contingently true if true, then such claims cannot be philosophical. Nevertheless, *they are characteristically philosophical*, because they involve many of what Bealer explicitly takes to be semantically stable terms. As a result, we have a significant class of counterexamples to NPK in both its strong and weakened forms that can be generated by simply specifying substitution instances for N in the ideal N -agent schema that have defeaters. This is especially problematic for Bealer's argument, as there seems to be a virtually inexhaustible number of such claims that can be found in epistemology, ethics, decision theory, philosophy of mind, and so on, and this shows that both the weakened and strong modal-autonomy arguments are simply unsound.

Bealer and other defenders of the autonomy of philosophy might, nevertheless, be tempted to argue that such claims can be known a priori by modal intuition even if they are contingent. In doing so the defenders would, of course, be ceding NPK for a significant class of philosophical problems. Nevertheless, this suggestion has some plausibility, because these kinds of claims are counterfactual in form, and it is not at all clear in general how the bona fides of any counterfactual claims is to be *empirically* established. Stalnaker, of course, rather early on in developing his particular theory of conditionals famously identified this specific problem as it applies generically to counterfactuals (Stalnaker 1981), and we can refer to it here as *the epistemic-access problem*. Regarding the three main problems with such conditionals, Stalnaker claims:

The third issue is an epistemological problem that has bothered empiricist philosophers. It is based on the fact that many counterfactuals seem to be synthetic, and contingent, statements about unrealized possibilities. But, contingent statements must be capable of confirmation by empirical evidence, and the investigator can gather evidence only in the actual world. (1981, 42)

⁹ Stalnaker 1981.

Stalnaker's solution, the apparently natural solution, is based on the following very general additional point: "It is because counterfactuals are generally about possible worlds which are very much like the actual one, and defined in terms of it, that evidence is so often relevant to their truth" (53). However, this general suggestion concerning the manner in which counterfactuals are confirmed is in need of serious elaboration. But the basic point nevertheless remains; ideal *N*-agent counterfactuals are about other possible worlds (whatever they turn out to be), to which we apparently cannot have direct empirical access, and it is not precisely clear how evidence gathered in the actual (and real) world can be relevant to confirming claims about what goes on in those worlds.¹⁰ What is encouraging is that such counterfactuals seem to be contingent, and they do appear to have empirical content in virtue of the fact that they are about ideal versions of actual agents (that is, us).¹¹ So there is some hope that such reasoning might well avoid the epistemic-access problem. Nevertheless, the failure of NPK, and, hence, of Bealer's strong and weak modal-autonomy arguments, should be regarded as an invitation to empiricists and naturalists to address and solve the epistemic-access problem in order to further the project of naturalizing philosophy.

Department of Philosophy
St. Cloud State University
123 Brown Hall
720 Fourth Avenue South
St. Cloud, MN 56301-4498
USA
shaffermphil@hotmail.com

References

- Audi, R. 1995. "Deductive Closure, Defeasibility and Skepticism: A Reply to Feldman." *Philosophical Quarterly* 45:494–99.
- Bealer, G. 1987. "The Limits of Scientific Essentialism." *Philosophical Perspectives* 1:289–365.
- . 1992. "The Incoherence of Empiricism." *Aristotelian Society*, supplementary volume 66:99–138.
- . 1996a. "A Priori Knowledge and the Scope of Philosophy." *Philosophical Studies* 81:121–42.
- . 1996b. "On the Possibility of Philosophical Knowledge." *Philosophical Perspectives* 10:1–34.

¹⁰ Compare David Lewis's comments on this issue in section 2.4 of Lewis 1986.

¹¹ For consideration of some of the difficulties that we face in determining which epistemic norms are appropriate relative to us, see Shaffer 2002, 2004, and 2006.

- . 1999. "A Theory of the A Priori." *Philosophical Perspectives* 13:29–55.
- . 2000. "A Theory of the A Priori." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 81:1–29.
- Bennet, J. 2003. *A Philosophical Guide to Conditionals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Feldman, R. 1995. "In Defense of Closure." *Philosophical Quarterly* 45:487–94.
- Holmes, R. 2003. *Basic Moral Philosophy*. 3d edition. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth.
- Kripke, S. 1980. *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Lewis, D. 1986. *On the plurality of worlds*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Putnam, H. 1975. "The Meaning of 'Meaning.'" In *Language, Mind, and Knowledge*, Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol. 7, edited by K. Gunderson, 131–93. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Shaffer, M. 2002. "Coherence, Justification and the AGM Theory of Belief Revision." In *Persepectives on Coherentism*, edited by Y. Bouchard, 139–60. Ontario: Aylmer-Éditions du Scribe.
- . 2004. "Bursting Bealer's Bubble: How the Starting Points Argument Begs the Question of Foundationalism against Quine." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 34:87–106.
- . 2006. "The Publicity of Belief, Epistemic Wrongs and Moral Wrongs." *Social Epistemology* 20:41–54.
- Shaffer, M., and J. Morris. 2006. "A Paradox for Possible Worlds Semantics." *Logique et analyse* 49:307–17.
- Stalnaker, R. 1981. "A Theory of Conditionals." In *Ifs*, edited by W. Harper, R. Stalnaker, and G. Pearce, 41–55. Oxford: Blackwell. Originally published in 1968.

Copyright of *Metaphilosophy* is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.