

Some Varieties of Pragmatic Validity and an Argument of Geach's

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This document records some preliminary thoughts on pragmatic validity and its relevance to Geach's arguments against emotivism. References to the literature are thrown around often, but left undocumented—there is no bibliography.

And this draft ends with an open problem.

Comments on this draft and relevant references would be appreciated. Sent them to rthomaso@umich.edu.

1. Semantic validity

The semantic validity of inferences, is a matter of truth under all circumstances. Decide on a logical vocabulary and on the parameters that serve to determine truth values. Let an interpretation fix values for the vocabulary and for the truth-relevant parameters. Then ask whether every interpretation that makes the premises of an inference true makes the conclusion true. If the answer is “yes” the inference is valid; otherwise it is invalid.

Modus ponens is a familiar example.

- (1a) If I have no money I can't buy a ticket.
- (1b) I have no money.
- (1c) So I can't buy a ticket.

Fix a speaker and a time. Leaving the meaning of ‘if’ unchanged, interpret ‘have’, ‘money’, ‘buy’, ‘can’, and ‘ticket’ any way you please—for instance, let ‘have’ mean *see*, ‘money’ mean *rain*, ‘can’ mean *should*, ‘buy’ mean *take*, and ‘ticket’ mean *umbrella*—(1c) will still be true if (1a) and (1b) are.

Although the speaker and time can be arbitrary, they must be the same for all three ingredients of Inference (1). If (1a) is true on Monday and (1b) on Tuesday, or (1a) is said by Ann and (1b) by Betty, the truth of (1c), at any time and for any speaker, is unrelated to the truth of the premises.

As usual, the validity of a single sentence is the special case of a 0-premise inference: a sentence is valid if it is true regardless of the values of its nonlogical vocabulary and contextual parameters.

2. Two sorts of pragmatic validity

The examples of pragmatic validity discussed in the literature either have to do with things that must be true whenever uttered because of characteristics of a context in which an utterance can be made, or with inferences that hold as a matter of context dynamics. Example (2) (noted by Hintikka in 1962) illustrates the first sort of validity, and Example (3) (the simplest sort of dynamic inference) illustrates the second.

- (2) I exist.
- (3a) Let $x = 2$.
- (3b) Then x is even.

3. Two sorts of pragmatic validity

More interesting examples from the literature are (4) and (5) (of pragmatic validities of the first sort, due to Hans Kamp and David Kaplan) and (6) (of the second sort, due to Robert Stalnaker).

- (4) If it's raining then it's raining now.
- (5) I am here now.
- (6a) The butler or the gardener committed the crime.
- (6b) So if the butler didn't commit the crime, the gardener did.

4. Illocutionary validity

A third sort of pragmatic validity is not, as far as I know, mentioned in the literature. But these *illocutionary validities* will not surprise anyone familiar with J.L. Austin's work on performatives.

- (7a) I promise to pay you \$10.
- (7b) So I owe you \$10.

This inference is valid because the conclusion follows from the successful performance of the illocutionary act performed in the premise.

It would be helpful to have tests for sorting out the different varieties of pragmatic

validity. I won't try to do that systematically here, but will mention one characteristic that distinguishes illocutionary from other validities. They are sensitive to the performative context and to the unity of the discourse. In the case of (7), if a very small child—too young to even have an allowance—were to say (7a), (7b) wouldn't follow. In general, inferences of this type will fail if the conditions for successful performance of the illocutionary act aren't present. In most cases, it is fairly easy to construct failures of this sort; in others, like (8) and (9) it is difficult or may even be impossible. (However, the validity of (8) does rest on the identity of the speaker remaining constant.)

- (8a) It's getting dark outside.
- (8b) So I have said it's getting dark outside.
- (9) Someone is saying something.

As for unity of the discourse, inference (7) also fails if the reference of the speaker or the addressed is not held constant over the two turns of the inference. And Example (8), unlike Example (1), depends on temporal unity; a short time must separate the premise and the conclusion. Or better, since dynamic logic uses discrete time, the premise and conclusion must be associated with adjacent moments. This characteristic is shared with the dynamic validities—even if the time is the nominal or inferential time of a Turing machine.

5. Differentiating the varieties of pragmatic validity

The main classificatory division among pragmatic validities seems to lie between those that depend on characteristics of utterance-capable or initial contexts, and those that depend on dynamics.

Classical dynamic logic abstracts away from most aspects of performance: Inference (3) is valid because (3a), considered as an act of thought, i.e. as a step in the calculations performed by an ideal computer, makes (3b) true at the next step. Its actions are neither social nor fallible. But there is no reason in principle why dynamic logic can't be generalized to include actions with social pre- and even post-conditions. Then we could formalize explicit dynamic validity along the following lines.

- (10a) Referee: Speaker-1 is qualified to make bets.
- (10b) Speaker-1: I bet you \$10 it will rain.
- (10c) Speaker-2: You're on!
- (10d) Referee: So if it will rain then Speaker-2 will owe Speaker-1 \$10.

From this general standpoint, there is no significant difference between illocutionary validities and dynamic validities.

6. A conditional example

More elaborate and interesting versions of illocutionary validity involve conditionals.

- (11a) If I promise to pay you \$10, I will pay you \$10.
- (11b) I promise to pay you \$10.
- (11c) So I will pay you \$10.
- (12a) If I bet you it will rain tonight, I will win.
- (12b) I bet you it will rain tonight.
- (12c) I will win.
- (13a) If I ask you whether you love me, you will answer me truly.
- (13b) Do you love me?
- (13c) So you will answer me truly.

Examples (11) and (12) look just like *modus ponens*. But Example (13) suggests that these validities may be significantly different: no one ever thought that *modus ponens* could have an interrogative premise. Nor should the validity of *modus ponens* depend on the performance of an illocutionary act. So it is better to think of (11) and (12) as cases where an illocutionary validity is masquerading as a case of logical validity.

As we will see, this last point has philosophical applications.

7. An unexpected problem with a well-known argument against emotivism

Recall Geach's famous argument against a simplistic version of emotivism. That argument invoked inferences that Geach assumes are instances of *modus ponens*, but that look like (11) and (12).

- (14a) If stealing is wrong, then getting your younger brother to steal is wrong.
- (14b) Stealing is wrong.
- (14c) So getting your younger brother to steal is wrong.

Geach argues that we can only account for the validity of this inference by treating 'Stealing is wrong' in (14a) and (14b) as having the same content, and supposing this content to be true or false.

This argument needs to be reconsidered to take into the account the possibility—if only, in the end to eliminate it somehow—that (14) is a case, like (12) and (13), of pseudo *modus ponens* and is actually an example of illocutionary validity.

To make the objection explicit in its strongest form, we'll assume that sentences, in a context of use, can have, to some degree, indicative content as well as performative force. Say the *significance* of a sentence—in a context of use and, perhaps, as a meaningful constituent of a larger syntactic structure—is a vector consisting of these two components and assigning a strength to each of them. So (15), for instance, in a given context of use, and a given syntactic position, has a significance that might consist, say, of either a dominant content component and a negligible force component, or a negligible content and a dominant force component.

- (15) I promise to pay you \$10.

Examples (11) and (12) are counterexamples to Geach's claim that the antecedent of the

conditional in the major premise and the minor premise must have the same content for the inference to be valid. In fact, the validity of the inference seems to depend on their being different. There is no general agreement about the semantic details at play in conditionals like, say, (11a). But all the leading proposals invoke the content of the antecedent, in the form of a distribution of truth values over possible worlds or points in a probability space. Whatever performative force the antecedent may have is neglected in interpreting the conditional.

But the validity of (11) involves a performative use of (15). In fact, the inference is validated by the illocutionary act performed in (11b), and the validity depends on identifying this force with the illocutionary act supposed to be performed in the antecedent of (11a). That is, the content of (15) as a component of (11a) has to be equivalent to the content of ‘I now guarantee that I will pay you \$10’. That is, it must be true at a possible world if and only if in that world the speaker promises to pay the hearer \$10. Otherwise inference (11) would not be an illocutionary validity.

An emotivist could then reply to Geach as follows. “If (15) has strong emotive force and little or no content when it is asserted as a free-standing sentence, then (14) can’t be a case of ordinary *modus ponens*. Geach was misled by appearances. The inference does look like a case of ordinary *modus ponens* but this is deceptive. Actually it is more like (13), and its apparent validity is illocutionary. The minor premise (14b) is emotive, and the antecedent (15) of the conditional in the major premise (14a) merely supposes that an illocutionary act is performed. In neither premise of the inference does the interpretation of (15) involve a content that is specifically ethical.”

To reply to this objection, a defender of Geach would have to show that (14) is actually a case of ordinary, logically valid *modus ponens* and quite unlike illocutionary validities like (11), (12), and (13). I think such a defense is possible, but will say no more about it in this draft.