

Class 24 - Beebee

I. Laws and intuitions

We have looked at arguments for HS, and arguments against it.
HS seems to be a default position, at least because of parsimony.
We have been trying to determine whether adding laws is necessary, or whether we can avoid adding them to our theories.
Ockham's razor tells us not to multiply entities unnecessarily, when constructing a theory.
We certainly have commitments to local matters of particular fact.
Do we need anything else, like laws, too?

Maudlin argued that we might have to expand our ontology to admit relational matters of fact.
Once we have accepted relational matters of fact, we have connections among the particular facts.
That's what laws are.
So, Maudlin is arguing to accept something like laws to our ontology.
Carroll urged us to expand our commitments even further.
He wanted us to admit the laws as irreducible and extra matters of fact.
Carroll is a realist about laws; he opposes supervenience/reduction in that he believes that it is possible to have two worlds which agree on all non-nomic facts but disagree on the laws.
His examples even included worlds in which there were laws, but no stuff.
If there is no stuff, then there is no way to reduce the laws to stuff!

Beebee defends HS against the intuitions that support Carroll's arguments.
One way to respond to Carroll's arguments and examples is to dismiss them since they are based on intuitions about possible worlds.
(Matt responded this way, in class.)
On the other hand, if we reject all arguments based on intuitions, it seems difficult to see how we could know anything about laws.
For, laws are essentially about counterfactuals.
The only way to differentiate between laws and accidental generalizations is on the basis of reasoning about possibilities.
We (most of us?) think that it is possible to make a gold sphere greater than a mile in diameter, but not possible to make such a sphere out of uranium.
The reason 'all persons in the room are third children' seems like an accidental generalization is just because it does not support counterfactuals.
So, unless we are willing to collapse the concept of law into the concept of accidental generalization, we are going to have to do some kinds of reasoning about possibility.
The language of possible worlds can be taken in a deflationary sense, as referring just to facts which supervene on facts about this world.

So, dismissing Carroll's argument because it relies on intuitions about counterfactual situations may be precipitate.
There are intuitions and there are intuitions, and we might be able to distinguish among them.
It would be nice if we could attack a certain class of intuitions, ones that support Carroll's argument, say, without having to dismiss all intuitions.
Beebee's central point is that the intuitions we have about Carroll's examples are based on a specific

untenable view about laws and governance.

Since, she argues, our intuitions about laws are grounded in a non-Humean conception of laws, the arguments based on Carroll's examples, and others like them, beg the question against the Humean. That is, she argues that Carroll has smuggled an anti-Humean conception of law into his examples.

II. Governance

Beebe interprets the general structure of the anti-Humean argument to be, "Humeanism is based on a conceptual error: that of thinking that it is conceptually possible for something which does not govern to be a law of nature" (580).

In response, she argues for a non-governing conception of laws of nature.

Laws may be understood as governing the events or actions to which they refer.

Beebe doesn't give a precise definition of governance, I think.

She describes the difference between governing and non-governing conceptions of laws in terms of (dis)analogies.

Moral laws govern in that they are prescriptive, in that they tell us how we should behave.

In cases like morality where laws govern, the law is connected with the imposition of sanctions.

If one breaks a prescriptive law, like a moral or civil law, one may be punished.

Similarly, in sports, if we break a rule, we are penalized.

Rules in sports, like moral laws and civil laws, tell us what we ought to do, when we can either follow the rules or not.

In contrast, we are not prohibited from breaking physical laws.

We are just unable to break them.

Physical laws are only prescriptive in the sense that we can not violate them.

There is no penalty for producing a superluminal signal; it's just impossible according to the physical laws.

One might thus call laws of nature vacuously prescriptive.

Though, they are clearly descriptive, describing interactions in the world.

It may be odd that we use 'law' to refer to both kinds of cases.

"Even if we eschew the notion that laws govern, we are still left with things which deserve the title 'law of nature' - although perhaps...it would have been better if laws of nature had been given a rather less suggestive name" (593).

Beebe cites both Aquinas and Boyle as denying that laws of nature should be called laws.

While laws of nature may not be prescriptive, they are predictive.

According to classical determinism, the laws, in conjunction with specific conditions at any time, determine future events, 578.

Both the Humean and the anti-Humean can be determinists.

For the Humean, the determination of future events will be purely a logical entailment, as in the D-N model.

Beebe says that the Humean can account for this predictive component of the laws because the laws are, in part, facts about the future.

But, for the anti-Humean, the determination is "metaphysically meaty....The laws 'make' the future facts be the way they will be: the laws are the ontological *ground* of the future facts...The laws are already present in the current state of the universe" (578).

Later, Beebe calls the anti-Humean picture “the Laplacean creation myth” (590); we will see this term again in the Loewer article, after break.

Beebe motivates the Humean position by showing that the Humean can be a compatibilist about free will, p 579.

Compatibilism says that free will is not opposed to determinism, that future events can be determined, and still we can be free.

I suppose that this argument might be convincing to someone with compatibilist intuitions.

For me, the idea of compatibilism seems so much like a contradiction that I don’t find the argument at all convincing.

We can talk about free will and compatibilism in class, if we want.

The problem of free will has two distinct sources.

As I have discussed it so far, it arises from the belief that the future events are strictly determined by the laws of nature and any particular state of affairs.

Traditionally, the problem arises from the belief in an omniscient God.

An omniscient eternal God, by definition, knows all future events, as well as all past and present events. Thus, they are already determined, and so my will is not free.

It is this traditional version of determinism which gives rise to the notion that the laws of nature govern.

“The term was introduced in order to capture the belief that what happens in the universe happens as a matter of divine decree - in which case the expression ‘laws of nature’ really did start out with an explicitly legislative connotation” (582-3).

To summarize, Beebe claims that there are really two senses of ‘law’.

In the moral/civil/sport sense, laws govern.

In the natural sense, laws just describe; they do not govern.

The only reason we might think of laws of nature as governing is because we hold on to a latent religious notion of a law, one that we need not accept.

“I take it to be just plainly true that belief in laws of nature does not conceptually presuppose belief in a divine lawgiver” (581).

If there is a non-governing conception of laws of nature, then counter-examples to HS which depend on the governing conception lose their force.

III. Counter-counter-examples

So, Beebe’s argument is as follows:

1. One may think of laws of nature as governing or not.
2. If one thinks of laws of nature as governing, we have already rejected HS.
3. But, Carroll’s counter-examples, and others like them, are convincing only if one thinks of laws of nature as governing.
4. If one thinks of laws of nature in the Humean sense, then one can easily dismiss Carroll’s counter-examples.

Thus, Carroll’s argument is question-begging against the Humean.

Consider the Carroll-Tooley case.

The defender of HS can deny that the worlds described in the example are possible, p 584.

Beebe portrays the question as a debate between competing intuitions.

On the one hand, we have the Humean intuitions that laws of nature are just descriptions of facts, and not governing.

For the Humean, if there are no facts in the world to determine whether L_1 or L_2 hold, then neither of those laws hold.

On the other hand, we have Carroll's realist intuitions about laws, on which the laws are prior to the local matters of facts, and govern them.

For the realist, it seems that one of those laws must hold.

If HS entailed the possibility of the two worlds Carroll describes, then there would be a problem with HS.

But, Carroll has not shown that HS is self-defeating.

"Carroll's alleged counter-example...is really just a restatement of this basic anti-Humean intuition, and as such poses no threat to the Humean" (585).

Beebe holds the same response to Carroll's mirror argument.

We have not seen the mirror argument, yet, but Beebe discusses it clearly, pp 586-7.

Consider two worlds, each with the familiar X-particles and Y-fields.

The X-particles move in straight lines for eternity.

In U_1 , all X-particles (there are five of them), when entering Y-fields, which they each do once, acquire spin up.

So, there is a law, L, that all X-particles acquire spin up when entering Y-fields.

In U_2 , one of the five X-particles, call it b, when entering the Y-field, does not acquire spin up.

So, L is not a law at U_2 .

Otherwise, the worlds are identical; so there is no explanation of why b behaves differently in the two worlds.

Besides the X-particles and Y fields, there is also a mirror, between b and the Y field toward which it is moving.

In U_1 and U_2 , the mirror is tilted (in position c) so that b enters the Y-field.

In U_{1*} and U_{2*} , the mirror is tilted (in position d) so that b is deflected away from the Y-field.

We can infer, from U_1 , that L holds in U_{1*} .

Since U_{1*} and U_{2*} are identical, one might further infer (from the non-nomic facts) that L should hold in U_{2*} .

But, we know that U_{2*} is supposed to be close to U_2 , in which case L should fail at U_{2*} .

Thus, the inference based on the non-nomic facts is fallacious.

But, the non-nomic facts are all the facts that the defender of HS has.

So, HS gets the wrong answer to the question of whether L is a law in U_{2*} .

QED.

Beebe discusses a formal version of the argument, and a formal response, and an informal version of the argument, and an informal response.

I will focus on the latter pair.

Beebe's Humean claim is that L is in fact a law at U_{2*} , p 590.

That is, she claims that Carroll's conclusion that L should fail at U_{2*} is based on governance intuitions.

Thus, Beebe is committed to the claim that contingent facts about the world determine the laws of nature.

This claim seems counter-intuitive to the realist, but it is in fact just a restatement of the Humean position.

"I don't think there's any way of trying to motivate the intuition that L is not a law in U_{2*} that *doesn't*

presuppose an anti-Humean starting point...If you start off by buying into the story I told earlier about the descriptive conception of laws, I can't see how Carroll's thought experiment could possibly move you to say that L isn't a law at U_2 " (591; I think she means " U_{2*} ", at the end; also at the end of the following paragraph. Am I wrong?).

Beebe's claim may seem counter-intuitive.

After all, we know that b does not acquire spin up in U_2 , and we designed U_{2*} to be as close as possible to U_2 .

It seems like L should fail at U_{2*} .

But, Beebe argues that there is no basis for that claim.

The facts in U_{2*} are identical to the facts at U_{1*} , and L is a law at U_{1*} .

We can not distinguish the two worlds on the basis of dispositions, even though it seems that we want to do so.

And, even though we designed U_{2*} to be as close as possible to U_2 , "There might easily be other worlds where the mirror is in position c that are closer to U_{2*} than U_2 is; U_1 for instance" (592).

This last claim entails that there is a non-symmetric accessibility relation among possible worlds.

It might be useful to look at the ramifications of having a non-symmetric accessibility relation in modal logic.

A rhetorical point for discussion: Has Beebe argued for HS, or merely against an argument that HS is false?