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Where is the Limit to Abduction's Explanatory Power?

Abstract

Abduction, also known as, inference to the best explanation, is employed in factual and normative inquiry. In this paper, I answer the question: where is the limit to abduction's explanatory power? To answer this question, I examine Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Descartes's *Discourse on Method*. I compare Hobbes's empirical beliefs about human psychology and Descartes's micro mechanical explanations with Hobbes's discussion of religion. As a result of this analysis, I argue that there is at least one case where religion is the limit to abduction's explanatory power, and that case is Hobbes's discussion of religion.

Where is the Limit to Abduction's Explanatory Power?

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Abstract

Abduction, also known as, inference to the best explanation, is employed in factual and normative inquiry. In this paper, I answer the question: where is the limit to abduction's explanatory power? To answer this question, I examine Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Descartes's *Discourse on Method*. I compare Hobbes's empirical beliefs about human psychology and Descartes's micro mechanical explanations with Hobbes's discussion of religion. As a result of this analysis, I argue that there is at least one case where religion is the limit to abduction's explanatory power, and that case is Hobbes's discussion of religion.

Abduction, or, as it is usually called, inference to the best explanation, is employed in both factual and normative inquiry. Where is the limit to abduction's explanatory power? In order to answer this question, I will examine Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Descartes's *Discourse on Method*. I will compare Hobbes's empirical beliefs about human psychology and Descartes's micro mechanical explanations with Hobbes's discussion of religion. As a result of this analysis, I will argue that there is at least one case where religion is the limit to abduction's explanatory power, and that case is Hobbes's discussion of religion.

Before I defend my claim, I must clarify a few concepts. First, most broadly, abduction, or inference to the best explanation, is a type of inference that assigns special status to explanatory considerations. I want to deal with abduction, however, in a more specific way. For the purposes of my argument, abduction is the process by which one arrives at a general conclusion from sensory experience that explains something about the universe. Although this process is explicitly adopted by Descartes in his micro mechanical explanations of the physical universe, Hobbes maintains that his political philosophy follows from axioms and logic alone. Essential to my main claim, I will argue that Hobbes is wrong. His political philosophy does not follow from axioms and logic alone but rather from beliefs about human psychology inferred from sensory experience. My assertion that Hobbes's beliefs are inferred from sensory experience, therefore, is an abstraction. Hobbes would never say this about his own beliefs. Second, abduction has explanatory power because it provides a reasonable conclusion for

reasonable people. In other words, based off of observation, abduction's goal is to posit an explanation that makes the most sense and seems reasonable.

Descartes's physics exemplifies the explanatory power of abduction in factual inquiry. In part five of *Discourse on Method*, Descartes employs abduction in order to investigate the laws of nature. While explaining light, Descartes "explained at some length what this light was that had to be found in the sun and the stars, and how from thence it travelled in an instant across the immense spaces of the heavens, and how it was reflected from the planets and comets to earth" (Descartes, *Discourse on Method* 24). Descartes explains light by examining his own observations of the sun and stars' light and arriving at a conclusion that both explains his observations and seems reasonable, namely that light must travel in an instant across the heavens. Descartes's method of inquiry clearly employs abduction. But, so what? Inference to the best explanation is typical of scientific inquiry, and it is so intuitively. Making hypotheses about our observations of the world is the most commonly accepted scientific methodology. Abduction's explanatory power is not limited by factual or scientific inquiry.

Hobbes's political philosophy demonstrates the explanatory power of abduction in normative inquiry. Hobbes's political claims are justified by his empirical beliefs about human psychology. In Ch. 13 of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Hobbes makes empirical claims about human psychology. Although Hobbes attempts to deduce his claims from logic and axioms alone, he cannot. His claims, instead, are beliefs about human psychology inferred from sensory experience. Hobbes's assertion that "the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others, that are in the same danger with himselfe" does not follow from his definitions or axioms (Hobbes 87). It follows from his personal experience. After observing the weak conspire with each other to take down the strong, Hobbes arrived at a conclusion that best explained his observations. Although abduction's explanatory power is more controversial and less intuitively obvious in normative than factual or scientific inquiry, in the case of Hobbes's political philosophy, abduction's explanatory power is not limited by normative inquiry.

Hobbes does not employ abduction in his discussion of religion. In Ch. 32 of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Hobbes discusses religion and the appropriate methodology for discovering truths about religious practice. Hobbes says that when inquiring after religious truths, "we are bidden to captivate our understanding to the words; and not to labour in sifting out a Philosophicall truth by Logick, of such mysteries as are not comprehensible, nor fall under any rule of naturall science" (Hobbes 256). Here, Hobbes means that although we should not wholly disregard reason or experience when discussing religion, we should not employ logic or scientific method to discover truths about religion.

Does this mean that in the case of Hobbes's discussion of religion, abduction's explanatory power is limited by religious inquiry? Yes, and there are three possible angles to take in order to make this argument. It is important to note that Hobbes does not explicitly say these things about his own beliefs. Similar to my earlier claim that Hobbes's political claims are justified by his empirical beliefs about human psychology, these three different angles are abstractions. They explain Hobbes's discussion of religion the best. First, Hobbes is not concerned with religion in the same way that he is concerned with political philosophy and natural science. He believes that there is no fact of the matter about religion and that religion is a matter of opinion. Religious truths, for Hobbes, are little t truths not capital T truths. They are a matter of opinion and not facts about the world as it really is. Furthermore, Hobbes does not employ abduction in his discussion of religion because religious truths, or opinions, are not conclusions that best explain sensory experience.

Second, Hobbes believes that there should be a distinction between religious and scientific inquiry. Like Galileo, Hobbes believes that science and religion are compatible and ultimately serve different purposes. In other words, scientific inquiry concerns the explanation of natural phenomena and sensory experience, while religion concerns salvation. Because they are concerned with different things, they do not conflict with each other. Hobbes, then, does not employ abduction in his discussion of religion because religion is not concerned with explaining natural phenomena and sensory experience.

Third, Hobbes believes that religion is simply dogma. According to Hobbes, "it is with the mysteries of our Religion, as with wholesome pills for the sick, which swallowed whole, have the vertue to cure; but chewed, are for the most part cast up again without effect" (ibid). In other words, religious truths should be accepted without reason or evidence. One should just follow what one's sovereign says about religious truths and doctrine. Hobbes does not want opposing religious factions to start a civil war and destabilize the commonwealth. In this way, Hobbes is conventional; he sees no reason to inquire into the truths of religion. Hobbes does not employ abduction in his discussion of religion both because it makes no sense to him to explain dogma and because he does not want the results of religious inquiry to destabilize the commonwealth. Furthermore, this angle allows Hobbes to solve the problem of religious duties forbidding one's submission to a sovereign. He gets out of this problem by saying that one should just submit to the religion of the commonwealth, thus remaining both religious and obedient to the sovereign. Coming from all three angles, in the case of Hobbes's discussion of religion, abduction's explanatory is limited by religious inquiry.

I must now reply to four possible objections to my argument. First, according to my second angle, Hobbes does not employ abduction in his discussion of religion because

conclusions from sensory experience that explain something about the universe cannot answer questions about salvation. This contradicts my claim that in the case of Hobbes's political philosophy, abduction's explanatory power is not limited by normative inquiry. In at least one possible view of salvation, one has to live according to religious life and abide by a moral code in order to be saved. Religious inquiry, then, would be normative in nature. And, according to me, abduction's explanatory power is not limited by normative inquiry. Hobbes should be able to employ abduction in order to inquire into religious truths concerning salvation. I do not think that this objection hurts my argument. The reason why this objection does not hurt my argument is because there is a distinction between prescriptive political claims and dogma. Hobbes makes prescriptive claims about politics based off of his observation. For instance, he posits that one should enter into a social contract and submit to a sovereign in order to leave the state of nature, where men are egocentric and there is a "war of all against all." The prescriptive claims in salvation, however, such as the moral code that one must abide by in order to be saved, are not based off of observation. They are dogma, prescribed to believers without any evidence or justification from observation. Hobbes does not employ abduction in the discussion of dogma. So, it would make no sense for him to employ abduction in the discussion of salvation.

Second, Hobbes got it wrong. Others, like Descartes got it right. So, although Hobbes's discussion of religion does limit abduction's explanatory power, my claim is insignificant because Hobbes was incorrect. Contrary to Hobbes, Descartes does not think that religious inquiry limits the explanatory power of abduction. In the Fifth Meditation of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes employs abduction in order to formulate a proof of the existence of God. According to Descartes, "from the mere fact that I can bring forth from my thought the idea of something, it follows that all that I clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to that thing really does belong to it, then cannot this too be a basis for the argument proving the existence of God" (Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* 88)? In other words, Descartes believes that the existence of God best explains and follows from his observations. It is important here not to be fooled by Descartes's language. He doesn't intend for his argument to resemble a mathematical proof. Instead, Descartes relies on his intuition to arrive at a reasonable conclusion. I have two things to say in response. First, even if Hobbes is wrong, my argument still holds. My argument merely claims that Hobbes believes that abduction's explanatory power is limited by religious inquiry. I do not take a stand on whether or not he is *correct*. Second, I agree that Descartes does not believe that abduction's explanatory power is limited by religious inquiry. I think it is beneficial to compare the two. And, although it is not the job of my argument, I think there is a lot to learn from the comparison of the two about the intersection of religion and science.

Third, Hobbes is not sincere. He uses irony and other rhetorical devices to undermine his readers' religious beliefs. His insincerity about religion calls into question his belief that the explanatory power of abduction is limited by religious inquiry. I have two things to say about this. First, this does not hurt my argument. In fact, it only reinforces it. If Hobbes is, indeed, insincere in order to undermine religious belief, he certainly does not think that abduction or scientific method can explain religious issues. This objection is entirely consistent with my first angle. If it were true that Hobbes was insincere, one reason would be that he thinks that religious truths are little t truths, or opinions. He, then, would think both that we should not waste our time with the dogmatic opinions of religion and that abduction is limited by religious inquiry. Second, although I do not wish to take a stand on whether or not Hobbes is not sincere, I think this objection faces serious problems. How can it account for the sheer amount of time Hobbes spends on his discussion of religion in his *Leviathan*? Hobbes would not have spent so much time discussing religion if he had not been so concerned with religious belief. Could it be because he is so insistent that we not be religious? This, however, cannot be right, since Hobbes views religion as another opportunity for us to submit to our commonwealth and sovereign.

Fourth, so what? Okay, I have shown that in at least one case abduction's explanatory power is limited by religion. This is obvious. Religion's explanations of the universe are not subject to logic or the scientific method and no one expects them to be. People believe in miracles and supernatural beings not because they most reasonably explain something about the world, but because they do just the opposite. Religion deals with hope and salvation, not physics or politics. My argument is, therefore, trivially true. I think this is wrong. My argument is not trivially true. Philosophers and scientists have tried to explain religious truths for centuries. Leibniz employed logic and axioms alone in order to provide a solution for the problem of evil. Descartes and many others used scientific methods to prove the existence of God. Even scientists today put forward evidence which they believe can only be reasonably explained by the existence of God. My claim provides an insight that not only is not trivially true but addresses a major controversy today.

What can we learn from my argument? It is intuitive and not interesting that abduction is employed in and is not limited by scientific inquiry. Scientists make hypotheses about their observations every day; it's what they do. It is less intuitive and more interesting that abduction is not limited by normative inquiry or prescriptive claims. This, too, however, we have a firm grasp on. The methodological legitimacy of ethics and political science is largely uncontroversial. Abduction in religion, however, is very controversial. Does scientific methodology have a place in religious inquiry? Everyone from Galileo to Descartes to Dawkins have had different, coherent answers to this question. I have pinpointed at least one case, Hobbes's discussion of religion, where scientific methodology is limited by religious inquiry. What can we do with this claim?

Although the job of another argument, we should evaluate whether or not Hobbes is *correct* that religion limits scientific methodology. This evaluation will inform the solution to the problem of science's place in religious inquiry. Furthermore, Why does he spend so much time on his discussion of religion if religion is merely a matter of opinion and not central to his philosophical project? Interpreters of Hobbes must continue to deal with Hobbes's obvious concern with religious belief.

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