COMMENTS ON GREG RESTALL & GILLIAN RUSSELL'S "BARRIERS TO INFERENCE"

Peter B. M. Vranas
vranas@iastate.edu
Iowa State University

2nd Formal Epistemology Workshop, 27 May 2005

OVERVIEW

Part 1

HUME'S LAW:
NORMATIVITY FORMULATION

Part 2

TWO PROBLEMS
WITH HUME'S LAW

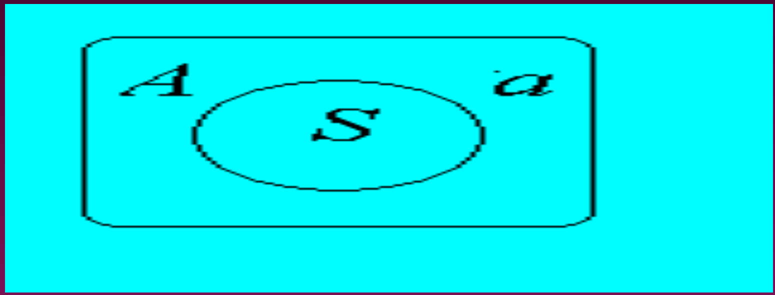
Part 3

TWO RESPONSES
TO THE SECOND PROBLEM

HUME'S LAW: NORMATIVITY FORMULATION

- Hume's Law: No satisfiable set of *descriptive* sentences entails a *normative* sentence.
- A sentence *A* is descriptive iff it is *preserved* under normative translations: for every model *M* that satisfies *A*, every normative translation of *M* also satisfies *A*.
- A sentence *A* is normative iff it is *fragile* under normative translations or extensions: for every model *M* that satisfies *A*, some translation or extension of *M* does not satisfy *A*.

PRESERVATION & FRAGILITY: NORMATIVE TRANSLATIONS



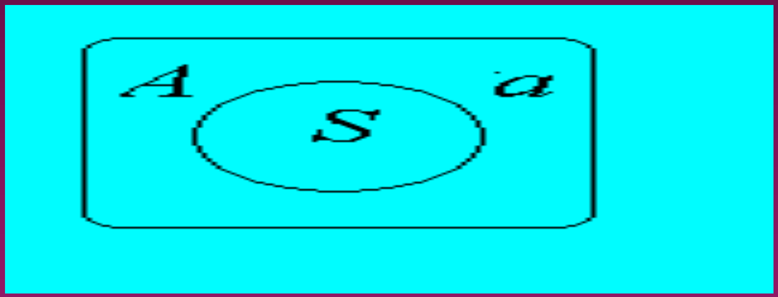
- S is the set of (a-) morally satisfactory worlds.
- A is obligatory iff it is true in *every* morally satisfactory world: $\mathrm{O}A \leftrightarrow S \subseteq A$.
- A is permissible iff it is true in *some* morally satisfactory world: $\mathrm{P}A \leftrightarrow S \cap A \neq \emptyset$.
- A normative translation changes S. So A remains true (is *preserved*), but $\mathrm{P}A$ and $\mathrm{O}A$ (if $A^C \neq \emptyset$) may become false (are *fragile*).

PRESERVATION & FRAGILITY: NORMATIVE TRANSLATIONS

- S is the set of (a-) morally satisfactory worlds.
- A is obligatory iff it is true in *every* morally satisfactory world: O$A \leftrightarrow S \subseteq A$.
- A is permissible iff it is true in *some* morally satisfactory world: P$A \leftrightarrow S \cap A \neq \emptyset$.
- A normative translation changes S. So A remains true (is *preserved*), but PA and OA (if $A^C \neq \emptyset$) may become false (are *fragile*).

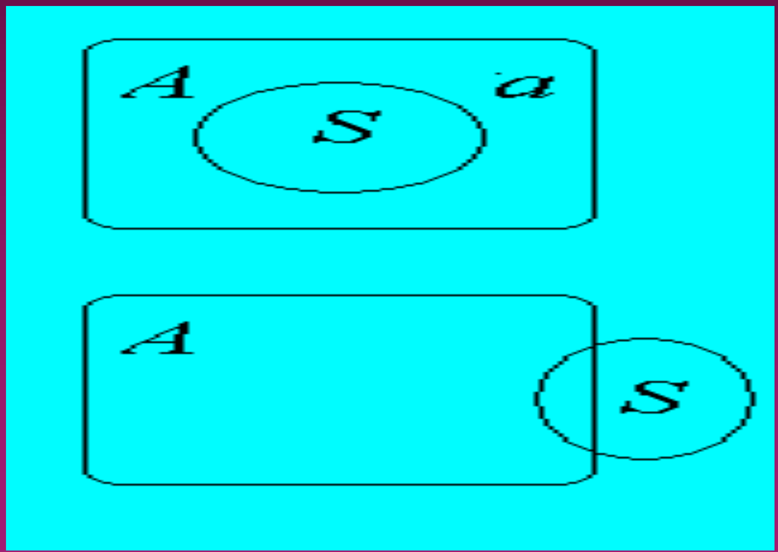
PRESERVATION & FRAGILITY: NORMATIVE EXTENSIONS

- A <u>normative extension</u> adds new worlds, including morally satisfactory ones.



PRESERVATION & FRAGILITY: NORMATIVE EXTENSIONS

- A <u>normative extension</u> adds new worlds, including morally satisfactory ones.



- So *A* and P*A* remain true (are *preserved*), but O*A* may become false (is *fragile*).

PART 2

Part 1

HUME'S LAW:
NORMATIVITY FORMULATION

Part 2

**TWO PROBLEMS
WITH HUME'S LAW**

Part 3

TWO RESPONSES
TO THE SECOND PROBLEM

A TECHNICAL PROBLEM WITH HUME'S LAW

- The problem: Hume's Law is false because $\Box A$ (which is descriptive because it is preserved under normative translations) entails OA (which is normative if A is not a tautology): in every model in which A is true at every world, A is true at every morally satisfactory world.
- The glitch: Lemma 26 is false because $\Box A$ is descriptive but not preserved under extensions.
- Restall & Russell might reply: $\Box A$ is not in their language. But then they should show that the problem disappears in a richer language.

PRIOR'S OBJECTION TO HUME'S LAW

- Prior's objection: Take a descriptive sentence *D* and a normative sentence *N*. Consider $D \vee N$.

1. If $D \vee N$ is normative, Hume's Law is false because $\{D\}$ entails $D \vee N$.
2. If $D \vee N$ is descriptive, Hume's Law is false because $\{D \vee N, {\sim}D\}$ entails *N*.

- Restall & Russell's reply: Prior's objection relies on a false dichotomy. $D \vee N$ may be *neither* descriptive *nor* normative.

WHY $A \vee OA$ IS NEITHER DESCRIPTIVE NOR NORMATIVE

1. Take a model in which A is false but OA is true (so $A \vee OA$ is true). Then in some translation OA becomes false and A remains false; so $A \vee OA$ becomes false and is thus not translation-preserved (i.e., not descriptive).
2. Take a model in which A is true. Then $A \vee OA$ is true and remains true in every translation or extension. So $A \vee OA$ is not translation- or extension-fragile (i.e., not normative).

A SUBSTANTIVE PROBLEM WITH HUME'S LAW

- The problem: Paradigmatically moral sentences are neither descriptive nor "normative". E.g.:
  - If he asks, you ought to tell him: $\sim A \vee \mathrm{O}T$.
  - Every citizen ought to vote: $\forall x(Cx \rightarrow \mathrm{O}Vx)$.
  - No student may cheat: $\forall x(Sx \rightarrow \sim\mathrm{P}Cx)$.
- Importance of problem: Hume's Law is silent about such sentences, but we want a law which says that such sentences don't follow from nonmoral ones. So Restall & Russell *have in effect retreated to a weakened barrier thesis*.

PART 3

<u>Part 1</u>
HUME'S LAW:
NORMATIVITY FORMULATION

<u>Part 2</u>
TWO PROBLEMS
WITH HUME'S LAW

<u>Part 3</u>
TWO RESPONSES
TO THE SECOND PROBLEM

RESPONSE 1: INTUITIVE ARGUMENT FOR FRAGILITY

- The response: Intuitively, fragility captures normativity. E.g.: (1) it is obligatory that X not hit Y, but (2) it is *not* obligatory in an "extension" in which they are training, and (3) it *is* obligatory in a further "extension" in which Z would kill both if X were to hit Y.
- My reply: ❶ This justifies fragility at most for OA, not for PA or $A \vee$OA. ❷ (2) and (3) cannot both hold: if OA is false in a model, it's false in *every* extension. So the argument is suspect.

RESPONSE 2: HUME'S LAW IS THE BEST ONE CAN DO

- The response: Mixed sentences, although admittedly moral, *must* be excluded from *any* version of Hume's Law because they follow trivially from paradigmatically nonmoral sentences (Prior): "No one is a citizen" entails "Every citizen ought to vote".
- My reply: One *can* do better. Recent work focuses on versions of Hume's Law in terms of "non-vacuous" entailment. See Gerhard Schurz, *The Is-Ought Problem*, Kluwer 1997.