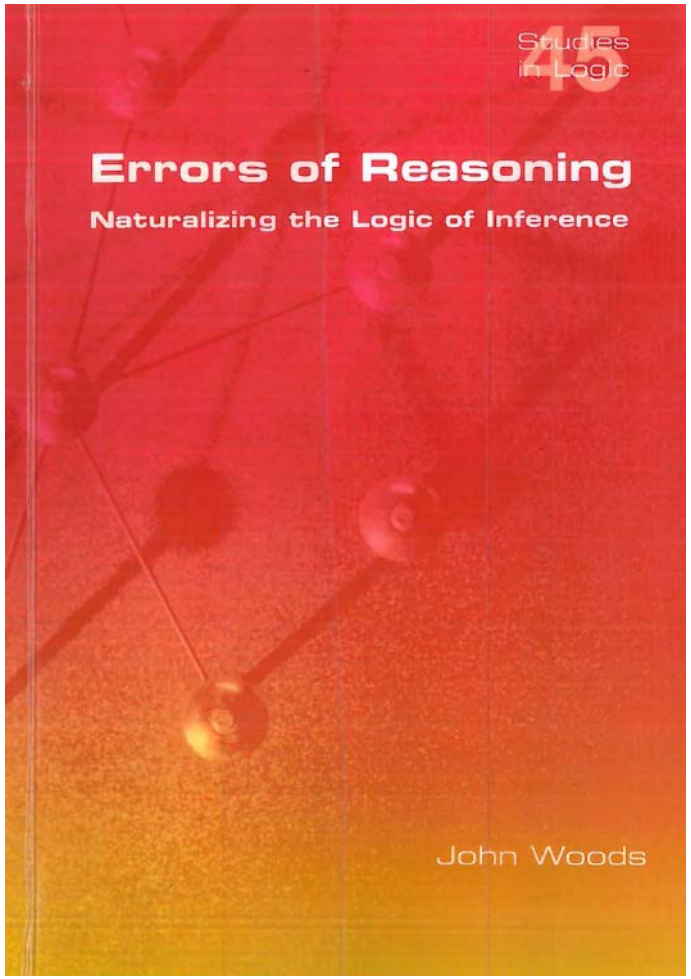
Reflective equilibrium and the conventionality of meaning

Jaroslav Peregrin

Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague & University of Hradec Králové

jarda.peregrin.cz

Woods on logic and the reflective equilibrium



Woods on logic and the reflective equilibrium

THE CONVERGENCE OF THE NORMAL AND THE NORMATIVE: As a first pass, and when there aren't particular reasons to the contrary, how we do reason from premisses to conclusions is typically how we should reason. In other words, in matters of consequence drawing there is a trending convergence between the normative and the normal, between what is usually done and what is rightly done.

Woods on logic and the reflective equilibrium

The thesis of NN-convergence should not be confused with the reflective equilibrium thesis. The reflective equilibrium thesis locates the normative legitimacy of our reasoning in the concurrent satisfaction of two conditions. One is that, when right, our actual reasoning conforms to our considered intuitions about what the rules of right reasoning are. The other is that what we take as the rules right reasoning reflect our considered intuitions about the rightness of our reasoning practices.

Reasoning would be subject to the nonnative clout of reflective equilibria if reasoning were a conventional practice. But this is the last thing that reasoning is.

Woods on logic and the reflective equilibrium

If the reflective equilibrium approach held for reasoning, we would have it in principle that even if today's modes of reasoning substantially violates those governing the reasoning of their 12th century counterparts, and vice versa, then today's reasoner is no better a reasoner than the reasoner of yore. But no one thinks that this could be true, even in principle. Correct reasoning, unlike correct speech, trends to the inertial even under massive changes in what we take for true. Reasoning is not conventional.

What is reasoning?

"Reasoning 1" (practical):

A monkey is in a room. Suspended from the ceiling is a bunch of bananas, beyond the monkey's reach. However, in the room there are also a chair and a stick. The ceiling is just the right height so that a monkey standing on a chair could knock the bananas down with the stick.

If the monkey climbs the chair and uses the stick to get the banana, it can be said to have reasoned.

What is reasoning?

Reasoning 2 (practical argument):

I want the banana.

<u>If I climb the chair and use the stick, I will be able to get the banana</u>

I will climb the chair and use the stick.

What is reasoning?

Reasoning 3 (theoretical arguments in support of the practical one)

If I climb the chair, I will be able to reach half a meter higher than from the earth
If I use the stick, I will be able to reach half a meter higher than without it
If I climb the chair and use the stick, I will be able to reach a meter higher than from the earth and without the stick

The banana are a meter out of my reach
If I were able to reach a meter higher than I am, I could reach them

If I were able to reach a meter higher than I am, I could reach the banana.
If I climb the chair and use the stick, I will be able to reach a meter higher than from the earth and without the stick
If I climb the chair and use the stick, I could reach the banana

What is reasoning?

Reasoning 4 (theoretical argument):

If one climbs a chair, one will be able to reach higher than from the earth

If one uses a stick, one will be able to reach higher than without it

If something is to high to reach, it might be accessible using a chair and/or a stick

Is reasoning conventional?

Reasoning 1: is not – its correctness is fully determined by the success

Reasoning 2: would be, if we considered the meanings as fixed

Reasoning 3: if we considered the meanings as fixed, it might be to the extent to which its conclusions are directly practically applicable

Reasoning 4: even if we considered the meanings as fixed and, it would be only to the extent to which its conclusions are projectible on practical application, which may be quite complex and very indirect

Theoretical reasoning is carried out in terms of *symbols* with specific *meaning*, which is inevitably conventional – therefore, what we call sucess in their case has a conventional dimension.

Is reasoning conventional?

"Reasoning" 1 is *not* conventional; but can we say, in this case, that "how we do reason is typically how we should reason"?

It seems quite possible that we may simply systematically fail to solve the problem, and hence *not* reason how we should reason.

This is precisely because this kind of reasoning is *not* conventional.

$\Rightarrow$ The normal need not converge with the normative

Is reasoning conventional?

In case of Reasoning 4 it is hard to imagine that evertybody might reason otherwise that he/she should reason.

Imagine that instead of *modus ponens*

If it rains, the streets are wet It rains
The streets are wet

$$\frac{A \rightarrow B \qquad A}{B}$$

everybody would use *modus schmoens* (Rips):

If it rains, the streets are wet It rains
The streets are not wet

$$\frac{A \rightarrow B \qquad A}{\neg B}$$

Is reasoning conventional?

Rips: "The existence of creatures who systematically deny modus ponens and accept *modus shmonens* would be extremely surprising - much more surprising than the existence of creatures who differ from us in basic perceptual or memory abilities. … *Modus ponens* and other inference principles like it are so well integrated with the rest of our thinking - so central to our notion of intelligence and rationality – that contrary principles seem out of the question. … Deep-rooted modes of thought such as these are important objects of psychological investigation, since they may well turn out to play a crucial organizing role for people 's beliefs and conjectures- or so I will try to argue."

Is reasoning conventional?

If everybody were to reason according to *modus schmoens* (and did not find it in any way problematic), the result would not be faulty reasoning, but rather a different sense of "if-then".

Here something as a "convergence of the normal and the normative" takes place – but precisely because this kind of reasoning *is* conventional, because it is carried out by means of *symbols*.

This is because the rules governing "if-then" are implicit in practice – they are displayed by how we in fact reason and how we take to be correct to reason.

We tend to bring such implicit rules to light by replacing them by explicit ones, and substitute artificial symbols ("$\rightarrow$") governed by the explicit rules for natural ones ("if-then") governed by the implicit ones.

Must we reason in terms of symbols?

Can we separate reasoning from symbols, can we see it as operating directly on (non-linguistic) propositions, symbols being merely dispensable auxiliaries?

Mercier and Sperber: "Unlike verbal arithmetic, which uses words to pursue its own business according to its own rules, argumentation is not logical business borrowing verbal tools; it fits seamlessly in the fabric of ordinary verbal exchanges. In no way does it depart from usual expressive and interpretive linguistic practices."

But our argument would survive even if reasoning were not an essentially tied to public language.

Must we reason in terms of symbols?

Logical operators are individuated in terms of their *function*, and there must be *something* which has the function.

Even if reasoning is not carried out in terms of overt – linguistic – symbols, it must be carried out in terms of *something*, some "symbols". These "symbols" can be always handled ("interpreted") in various ways.

At the same time they are individuated by means of the ways in which they are handled. They cannot be handled in globally "improper" ways.

However, the ways they are handled may be – more or less – tortuous, gappy or uncertain – we replace them by means of streamlined explicit specifications.

Reflective equilibrium

The way we fit the streamlined explicit specification – the explicit rule – to the usage is the method of reflective equilibrium.

We produce a tentative explicit rule and confront it with the actual way of usage.

Then we do away with the discrepancies both by amending the rule and by modifying or reconceptualizing the ways of usage.

Conclusion

There cannot be a whoesally wrong reasoning – like reasoning with *modus schmoens* instead with *modus ponens*.

Reasoning is a matter of symbols (or at least "symbols") and symbols are individuated functionally.

Something that looks like reasoning can turn out to be completely "wrong" in the sense of not making sense or not being reasoning; not wrong in the sense of being patently incorrect.

An implication governed by *modus schmoens* would make no more sense than a married bachelor; and another operator governed by *modus schmoens* is a commonplace (e.g. $\neg A \vee \neg B$)

Conclusion

Due to the fact that the identify of logical operators (as well as other symbols of our language) is a functional matter, their functioning must be guarded and regulated in order that they do not go corrupt.

This happens partly implicitly, as a result of the homeostatic nature of our practices of reasoning (the "invisible hand of logic"); but it can happen also implicitly, in that we replace the natural homeostasis by artificial *gleichschaltung*.

The movement from the implicit homeostatic regulation to the regulation by means of explicit rules is a delicate one, and it could hardly suceed if it were not to proceed via a process of reflective equilibrium.