On Inconceivability

There are very few propositions of interest that are either about immediately known psychological states or are logical consequences of such. I mean very few such propositions are of philosophical interest. There are, of course, philosophers who would deny this, e.g. phenomenalists. However, such philosophers have not had great success in analyzing propositions so as to accord with their claims, so at any rate very few propositions of philosophical interest have been shown to be either about immediately known psychological states or to be logical consequences of such. I will take the inconceivability of the truth of a proposition to be an immediately known psychological state for the purposes of this paper, although even this is perhaps controversial. I am going to give a description of a psychological state, which, although I do not know if it has ever existed, I can easily imagine to have existed. Suppose a philosopher, who has abandoned the notion of necessary truth, raises his child to believe that no truth is necessary. The philosopher is a nominalist and also teaches his child dogmatically that there are no non-temporal entities. The child, John, grows up and when confronted with the question of whether or not there are necessary truths, he finds it inconceivable that there are necessary truths. Then John is confronted with the following assertion:

materially implies? or is inconceivable?

(p)(S)((S finds it inconceivable that -p) only if necessarily p) P1

The above proposition differs from the one suggested in your lecture, but I think it is an interesting one any way.

The difference is that yours is general, mine singular, first person present tense. This is also important

John finds a number of propositions to be inconceivable yet in no case is be willing to admit the negation of the proposition is necessary. After realizing this, John finds the proposition P1 inconceivable. John knows then that the is

John finds it inconceivable that (p) (S)((S finds it inconceivable that -p) only if necessarily p). **P2**

Although john finds the proposition P1 inconceivable, as is expressed in proposition P2, he is not satisfied with this as an argument against those who have advansed the view. He does not regard appeals to inconceivability to carry any philosophical weight, although he will admit that the truth of some propositions is inconceivable. He will accept as arguments conclusions drawn logically from immediately known psychological states. He tries to construct such an argument against P1, and notes the following. P1 & P2 only if -P1. This he arrives at by substituting-P1 in for p in P1. Thus he arrives at

(S)((S finds it inconceivable that --P1) only if necessarily -P1)

Then he substitutes 'John' in for S, and arrives at:

(John finds it inconceivable that --P1) only if necessarily -P1.

John realizes that --P1 is equivalent to P1 an finds --P1 inconceivable just as he found P1 inconceivable. Of course the following will hold; (necessarily -p) only if -p. Thus it will follow that

(John finds it inconceivable that --P1) only if -P1

If, as in this case, John does find it inconceivable that -P1, then he may conclude that -P1, relying only upon logic and his knowledge of his own psychological state.

The previous argument is not a particuliarly convincing one. It rest upon the assumption that a certain psychological state exists, or it must do so if it is to prove that P1 is false. The aim of the argument was to show that the truth of P1 assumes that a certain psychological state does not exist. Even if it is true that this state does not exist this is a contingent fact and thus doubt is shed upon P1. However there is another much stronger argument against P1. This argument depends upon the characterization of necessary truth given in class. Namely that necessary truths only involve essentially non-temporal entities. There are propositions whose negations are inconceivable, but which are not necessary, in the above sense. The following is an example of such a proposition:

(I find it inconceivable that it is raining and it is not raining) only if ~ (it is raining and it is not raining)

I find that it is inconceivable that the negation of the above proposition is true. If the left side of the conditional is true , I find it inconceivable that the right side is false, and the only case in which the conditional is not true is when the left side is true and the right side is false, a case I cannot conceive of. However, the propositition is also not a necessary one. It involves essentially 'I', and I am, perhaps unfortunately, not a non-temporal entity. Thus, the above is a definative counter example to the proposition P1. I find it quite interesting that it is possible to arrive at a definite result about a proposition such as P1, although it doesn't carry us any futher

[illegible] convincingly [illegible]

[illegible] the view [illegible] necessary truth

It would "I" in the sense in which it [illegible] essentially), designate [illegible] "I" [illegible] designates? [illegible] The [illegible] is extremely difficult) towards more truth.

What about the following proposition?

(p)(S)((S finds it inconceivable that -p) only if p) P3

The arguments against the previous proposition do not apply to this one, since it does not contain the necessity operator. Any substitution instance of it will apparently not be inconceivable, since it will be inconceivable that it is false. However it does not staightforwardly follow that the universal quantification itself might not be inconceivable. There are in fact, examples of universal quantifications to which I can give no substitution instance which I can conceive to be false, yet I cannot conceive the universal quantification to be true. The following is one example like this good

(n)(n is a natural number only if I have thought of n)

If I actually conceive of the truth of any sustitution instance the above, i.e. conceive the truth of the proposition expressed by any sentence which is obtained by substituting the name of a natutal number in for n in the above, then I have thought of the number and thus the conditional must be true. However I know that the number of natural numbers is infinite, and that there exist natural numbers which I have never thought of. I do not think this example goes very far towards showing that P3 might after all be inconceivable, but I do think it does show that it is not altogether clear why P3 couldn't be inconceivable, even if it is admitted that this is so. If P3 were inconceivable to some person, he could construct an argument analogous to the first one used against P1.

See my [illegible]

But the charge against inconceivability which I find most damaging is simply that different people find different things inconceivable. What people can conceive of is apparently dependent upon the time and place they live. If one holds the view that the world exists independently of our conceptions of it, it will be difficult to accept inconceivability as epistemologically fundamental. I think it is considerations like this last one that really must serve to guide us in philosophy, and this sort of argument has often been used against inconceivability. However, I have attempted to show that a person could been im a certain psychological state, and from this deduce that P3 is false, and that it is not altogether clear that this psychological state could not occur.

This is not so clear.

Is there any alternative? Anything epistemological would have to [illegible] psychological things and so [illegible] the same objection.

Excellent. I would be glad to explain my comments. You may also wish to talk with Al Casullo about these issues. He is writing his Ph.D. thesis on them.

G Darland