

Rules and Self-Citation

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LONG ABSTRACT

In “What the Tortoise Said to Achilles” (1895) Lewis Carroll raises a problem about inferential behavior that generalizes to a distinct form of skepticism about rules. The problem is that for any premises jointly classically entailing a given conclusion, say

- (1) p
- (2) if p , then q
- (3) q ,

it is possible to resist the conclusion by failing or refusing to acknowledge that the relevant inferential license is in effect. But adding the license as an additional premise to the original premise-set, as in

- (2.1) (3) follows from (1) and (2)

invites an analogous worry with respect to the new inferential setting, prompting the addition of

- (2.11) (3) follows from (1) and (2) and (2.1),

and then of

- (2.111) (3) follows from (1) and (2) and (2.1) and (2.11),

and so on without end. For any premise-set, the legitimacy of drawing a conclusion is claimed to require an inferential license not yet accounted for among the extant premises. The skeptical generalization is that drawing conclusions from premises is never fully legitimate.

I offer a previously overlooked solution to this problem in terms of a self-citational inferential license that can act as a regress blocker. If instead of adding (2.1) to (1) and (2) we add an inferential license that includes its own citation via self-denotation, then the skeptical stance is revealed to be impossible:

- (2.1') (3) follows from (1) and (2) and (2.1').

For if the skeptic accepts (1) and (2) and (2.1') and still fails or refuses to accept that (3) follows from (1) and (2) and (2.1'), this can only mean that skeptic both accepts (2.1') – along with (1) and (2) – and doesn't accept it, which is impossible.

I consider a skeptical response to this solution that claims that (2.1') is problematic insofar as it entails a Curry-paradoxical conditional that would enable the derivation of *anything* from (1) and (2). The relevance of Curry's paradox to the foregoing is limited, however, by the following variant that avoids self-denotation altogether:

(1) p

(2) if p , then q

(2.1'') (3) follows from (1) and (2) and (2.1''')

(2.1''') (3) follows from (1) and (2) and (2.1'')

(3) q .

The skeptic here accepts (1), (2), (2.1''), and (2.1'''), but doesn't accept that (3) follows from (1), (2), (2.1''), and (2.1'''). Given the monotonicity of the relevant kind of reasoning, the skeptic will not accept that (3) follows from any subset of this premise-set. And so, the skeptic will not accept that (3) follows from (1), (2), and (2.1'''), and will not accept that (3) follows from (1), (2), and (2.1''). But that means that the skeptic doesn't accept (2.1'') and (2.1''') after all, which contradicts their acceptance.

I end by considering a different skeptical response that utilizes the familiar distinction between two ways of accepting a rule: as action-guiding and as a mere truth. According to this response, the skeptic can accept (2.1') (or accept (2.1'') and (2.1''')) in one sense – as a mere truth – without accepting it in another sense – as action-guiding. I argue that this response is ultimately unsatisfactory and conclude by sketching an alternative conception of rules as representations of behavior deployed for various purposes, some theoretical and others practical. This alternative conception does not allow the skeptical problem to get off the ground.