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“Might” Arguments for Anti-Realism and the Method of Parallel Arguments

The hypothetical past: It’s controversial whether one of the following is true and the other is false:
(A) If I had been offered Cheerios for breakfast yesterday, I would have accepted
(B) If I had been offered Cheerios for breakfast yesterday, I would not have accepted

The hypothetical future: It’s also controversial whether one of the following is true and the other is false:
(C) If I’m offered Cheerios for breakfast tomorrow, I will accept
(D) If I’m offered Cheerios for breakfast tomorrow, I will not accept

The (simple) future: Finally, we might note that it is controversial whether one of the following is true and the other false:
(E) I will eat breakfast tomorrow
(F) I will not eat breakfast tomorrow

Bob Adams suggests this “might” argument to make the case that neither (A) nor (B) is true:
1. This is true: (G) If I had been offered Cheerios for breakfast yesterday, I might not have accepted
2. This is true: (H) If I had been offered Cheerios for breakfast yesterday, I might have accepted
3. If (G) is true, then (A) is not true
4. If (H) is true, then (B) is not true
So, 5. (A) is not true (follows from 1 and 3)
So, 6. (B) is not true (follows from 2 and 4)
So, 7. Neither (A) nor (B) is true (follows from 5 and 6)

One can similarly argue that neither (C) nor (D) is true:
8. This is true: (I) If I am offered Cheerios for breakfast yesterday, I might not accept
9. This is true: (J) If I had been offered Cheerios for breakfast yesterday, I might accept
10. If (I) is true, then (C) is not true
11. If (J) is true, then (D) is not true
So, 12. (C) is not true (follows from 8 and 10)
So, 13. (D) is not true (follows from 9 and 11)
So, 14. Neither (C) nor (D) is true (follows from 12 and 13)

And one can somewhat similarly argue that neither (E) nor (F) is true:
15. This is true: (K) I might not eat breakfast tomorrow
16. This is true: (L) I might eat breakfast tomorrow
17. If (K) is true, then (E) is not true
18. If (L) is true, then (F) is not true
So, 19. (E) is not true (follows from 15 and 17)
So, 20. (F) is not true (follows from 16 and 18)
So, 21. Neither (E) nor (F) is true (follows from 19 and 20)

Premises 3, 4, 10, 11, 17, and 18 can all be supported by “clashes”: In each case, the conjunction listed “clashes,” or seems inconsistent. And if it’s inconsistent, then the two conjuncts can’t both be true. So, we can infer from the truth of one of them that the other isn’t true.

3 can be supported by the fact that this seems to clash:

(A+G) If I had been offered Cheerios for breakfast yesterday, I would have accepted, but If I had been offered Cheerios for breakfast yesterday, I might not have accepted

4 can be supported by the fact that this seems to clash:

(B+H) If I had been offered Cheerios for breakfast yesterday, I would not have accepted, but If I had been offered Cheerios for breakfast yesterday, I might have accepted

10 can be supported by the fact that this seems to clash:

(C+I) If I’m offered Cheerios for breakfast tomorrow, I will accept, but If I am offered Cheerios for breakfast yesterday, I might not accept

11 can be supported by the fact that this seems to clash:

(D+J) If I’m offered Cheerios for breakfast tomorrow, I will not accept, but If I am offered Cheerios for breakfast yesterday, I might accept

17 can be supported by the fact that this seems to clash:

(E+K) I will eat breakfast tomorrow, but I might not [eat breakfast tomorrow]

18 can be supported by the fact that this seems to clash:

(F+L) I will not eat breakfast tomorrow, but I might [eat breakfast tomorrow]

When evaluating arguments for controversial conclusions, it’s sometimes a good idea to consider ***parallel arguments*** for conclusions that are uncontroversially wrong. Because their conclusions are so bad, we can know (or at least take it as relatively settled) that the arguments go wrong somehow. With the matter of whether they go wrong somewhere nailed down, we can proceed with more confidence in trying to determine just how and where they go wrong. And sometimes our best accounts of where the parallel argument goes wrong can then give us clues as to how to evaluate our original arguments (for controversial conclusion). So consider….

The (simple) past: One of the following is true and the other is false:
(M) Rachel ate breakfast yesterday
(N) Rachel did not eat breakfast yesterday

I know, I know: Maybe Rachel did something on the borderline of eating breakfast yesterday, in which case something funny might be going on with the truth values of (M) and (N). But we’re not worrying about vagueness now; just about the status of the past (as compared with the future and the hypothetical future and hypothetical past). So let’s just stipulate that Rachel engaged in no borderline behavior (and we can make similar stipulations about her wrt the future and the relevant hypothetical situations). Now (with our stipulation in place), it should be uncontroversial that one of the above pair of claims is true and the other false—though we don’t know which is which.

Yet, we can give an argument much like the ones we encountered above to the conclusion that neither (M) nor (N) is true:

22. This is true: (O) Rachel might not have eaten breakfast yesterday
23. This is true: (P) Rachel might have eaten breakfast yesterday
24. If (O) is true, then (M) is not true
25. If (P) is true, then (N) is not true
So, 26. (M) is not true (follows from 22 and 24)
So, 27. (N) is not true (follows from 23 and 25)
So, 28. Neither (M) nor (N) is true (follows from 26 and 27)

And, as with the previous arguments, the key conditional premises can be supported by clashes:

24 can be supported by the fact that this seems to clash:

(M+O) Rachel ate breakfast yesterday, but Rachel might not have eaten breakfast yesterday

25 can be supported by the fact that this seems to clash:

(N+P) Rachel did not eat breakfast yesterday, but Rachel might have eaten breakfast yesterday

But with this argument, we know (or can at least take it as relatively settled) that *something* has gone wrong.

Questions: What has gone wrong here in this parallel argument? And could something similar be going wrong with our earlier arguments?

My proposal: I propose that what’s happening here in our parallel argument is that, though (M+O) and (N+P) do clash—i.e., they *seem* inconsistent—the two things they’re saying aren’t really inconsistent with one another. Rather (to work this out in the first case of (M+O); a similar account, moving “not”s around, would apply to (N+P)), when you assert the first half of (M+O), while all you say is that Rachel did eat breakfast yesterday, you represent yourself as *knowing* that she did—because you generally represent yourself as knowing what you flat-out assert to be the case. And the second half of (M+O), the “might not” part, is epistemic and has as part of its meaning that you *don’t know* that Rachel ate breakfast yesterday. Thus, there really is an inconsistency involved in asserting (M+O), but it’s not an inconsistency in the two parts of what (M+O) is saying, but rather between what the second half of it is saying and something that gets represented as being the case when the first half is asserted. Here’s how I put the point about very similar sentences (involving “possible”, rather than “might”; note that the “C” and the “A” I’m referring to in the below passage are different from the “C” and the “A” of this sheet) in a paper:

Yet,

(C′ + A′) It’s possible that Speedy didn’t score the winning run, but he did,

does sound awful—about as bad as (C + A). Why? And, more generally, why do conjunctions of the form “P, but it’s possible that not-Pind” (the subscript “ind” indicates that the embedded P is in the indicative mood), like, to take another example, “It’s raining outside, but it’s possible that it isn’t,” produce the feeling of inconsistency, though they are in fact perfectly consistent? Briefly, as I’ve argued elsewhere, it’s because (a) in flat-out asserting that P, while one doesn’t assert that one knows that P, one does represent it as being the case that one knows that P, and (b) the content of “It’s possible that not-Pind” is such that this second conjunct entails that the speaker doesn’t know that P. Thus, what one says in asserting the second conjunct of “P, but it’s possible that not-Pind,” while it’s perfectly consistent with what one says in asserting the first conjunct, is inconsistent with something one represents as being the case in asserting the first conjunct. This supports our sense that some inconsistency is responsible for the clash involved in asserting the conjunction, while, at the same time, happily removing that inconsistency from the realm of what’s asserted: The conjunction asserted is itself perfectly consistent, but in trying to assert it, one gets involved in a contradiction between one thing that one asserts, and another thing that one represents as being the case. (“Can It Be That It Would Have Been Even Though It Might Not Have Been?”, *Philosophical Perspectives* 13 (1999): 385-413; p. 389)

If this account is right, then the two halves of our conjunctions are not really inconsistent with one another, and what the truth of the second half implies is just that you *don’t know* the first half is true, not that the first half actually isn’t true.

 If that’s what’s going on in our parallel argument, can something similar can be going on with our original three arguments? Yes. In each case, I think the relevant “might” claims can be just expressing epistemic possibilities (what’s possible for all we know). That seems to be a natural reading of them. Thus, we can say that Adams is over-reading the like of (H) and (G) when he takes them to “deny” (Adams, p. 110b) the likes of (A) and (B), respectively. They can instead be taken as mere denials of the speaker’s knowledge of the likes of (A) and (B).

Julien’s proposal: At the end of the Wednesday’s class (and then going into discussion after class), Julien was wondering whether the “might” claims involved in our arguments might be ambiguous between an epistemic (having to do with what we know) vs. a more metaphysical reading. And, yes, I think something like that may very well be going on. But so long as they have the epistemic reading, such a reading might well account for why the the various clashing conjunctions do clash. Note that (M+O) and (N+P) “clash”, even though there might be a metaphysical reading for the “might have”s they contain—a reading on which those conjunctions are not only themselves consistent, but on which one gets involved in no representational inconsistency in trying to assert them. Yet the presence of the epistemic reading seems to account for why they “clash”. Something similar can be going on with (A+G), (B+H), (C+I), (D+J), (E+K), and (F+L).