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Commentary on: Fred J. Kauffeld's "The epistemic relevance of social considerations in ordinary day-to-day presumptions"

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Kauffeld takes Godden and Walton to hold that, on Kauffeld's account, "natural presumptions have two components, a normative/social component and an empirically oriented predictive component." But Kauffeld says that he represents "the minimal structure of presumptive inference as having three components." Stated in a simpler form than they are by Kauffeld, these components are:

- (1) the supposition that *A* has an obligation or other commitment to do *x*.
- (2) the supposition that *A* will do *x* rather than risk resentment, retribution, etc. for not doing *x*.
- (3) the inferred conclusion that *A* will do *x*.

Kauffeld does not propose an argument schema that incorporates the three components he distinguishes in his account of the minimal structure of presumptive inferences. One such schema is the following:

- S1
1. *A* has an obligation or other commitment to do *x*.
 2. *A* will do *x* rather than risk resentment for not doing *x*.
- Therefore presumably,
3. *A* will do *x*.

But this schema is circular, for the conclusion that *A* will do *x* is asserted in premise 2. One option would be to drop Kauffeld's supposition 2 and thus remove the motive for including premise 2 in the schema. The result would be the two-component account that Godden and Walton think Kauffeld in fact gives. But Kauffeld would not find this outcome acceptable.

I take premise 2 to be an elliptical explanation to the following effect:

- (E) *A* will do *x* because *A* would rather do *x* than risk resentment for not doing *x*.

This explanation entails:

(R) A would rather do x than risk resentment for not doing x .

(R) is not the same as Kauffeld's risk of resentment supposition, but it is entailed by my version of that supposition (namely premise 2 in S1) expanded as explanation (E). Thus, Kauffeld is, I believe, committed to (R).

I will return to (R) below in a comment prompted by a point which, as Kauffeld reports, Godden makes in a critique of a reply Kauffeld has made to Godden and Walton. Godden says:

... presumptive inferences are warranted only in cases where their antecedent conditions have something more than mere social force. They must have ... at least some probative weight, or positive relevance to their conclusions. (Godden, 2011, p. 12)

I want to consider what Godden says here, and for this purpose I will need an account of positive statemental relevance. The account I will use is Trudy Govier's. According to Govier, "[a] statement A is *positively relevant* to another statement B if and only if the truth of A counts in favor of the truth of B " (Govier, 2010, p. 148). Now a judgment as to whether the truth of one statement counts in favour of the truth of another may be made on the basis of background beliefs or background knowledge possessed by the individual who makes the judgment. Consider the following example:

1. Mary has a test in her physics course tomorrow.
Therefore presumably,
2. She will study for it today.

Suppose that Mary's friend Amy reasons in this manner. She believes that her premise is true. She also believes that the truth of her premise counts in favour of the truth of her conclusion, and she believes this because she knows that Mary normally studies the day before she has a test. She would therefore say that her premise is positively relevant to her conclusion, and she would base this judgment on background knowledge she possesses about Mary's study habits. Of course this background knowledge of hers could be considered to be a tacit premise of her reasoning. But for my purposes the pertinent question is whether the sole stated premise of her reasoning – the statement that Mary has a test in her physics course tomorrow – is positively relevant to the conclusion that Mary will study for her physics test today. Amy would say that it is, and given her background knowledge about Mary's study habits she would be justified in saying this.

Next, consider the following schema:

S2

1. A has an obligation or other commitment to do x .
Therefore presumably,
3. A will do x .

Is (1) positively relevant to (3)? Suppose that I believe that

(R) *A* would rather do *x* than risk resentment for not doing *x*.

I would then say that if (1) is true, its truth counts in favour of the truth of (3), and so I would say that (1) is positively relevant to (3). Further, I would be justified in saying this, assuming that I am justified in believing (R).

In Godden's terminology, the stated premise of S2 is an antecedent condition of the presumptive inference exhibited by the schema. *Ex hypothesi*, that premise has what Godden calls "social force." Given (R) as background information, it also has positive relevance to the conclusion. Taken as background information, (R) can itself be considered an antecedent condition of the inference; we may call it the risk of resentment condition. On this construal, the inference has two antecedent conditions, one of which (the "social force" condition) is positively relevant to the conclusion in virtue of the other condition (the risk of resentment condition). Of course, the risk of resentment condition, simply as such, is *itself* a social force condition. What we have, then, is a presumptive inference with two antecedent conditions each of which has social force; but each of the conditions also has more than *mere* social force because one of them is positively relevant to the conclusion in virtue of the other. Kauffeld's account of presumptive inference can, I believe, accommodate this analysis.

Recall that (R) is entailed by my version of Kauffeld's risk of resentment supposition expanded as

(E) *A* will do *x* because *A* would rather do *x* than risk resentment for not doing *x*.

The reason *A* thinks he risks resentment if he does not do *x* is that he has an obligation or other commitment to do *x*. Assume that what he has is an obligation and consider

S3
 1'. *A* has an obligation to do *x*.
 Therefore presumably,
 3. *A* will do *x*.

On a possible and I think natural construal, this inference assumes that *A* considers, or will consider, that his having an obligation to do *x* gives him a reason to do *x*; or, to put it differently, that because he has an obligation to do *x* he has a reason to do *x*.¹ What would this reason be? It might be that he risks incurring resentment if he does not do *x*, given that he has an obligation to do *x*. This would be a prudential reason. But the reason *A* thinks he has to do *x* might be different, though also

¹ Derek Parfit notes that "[w]hen we claim that we have an obligation to act in some way, we may be intending to imply that we have a reason to act in this way" (Parfit, 2011, p. 312).

prudential; for example, it might be that if he does x , he will burnish his reputation for being a person who fulfils his obligations. Alternatively, A might think that his obligation to do x is a moral obligation and that it therefore gives him a moral reason to do x . The reason might simply be that he ought to fulfil his moral obligations. Or it might have to do with the consequences for all those concerned (not just for himself) of his fulfilling his obligation to do x , as compared to the consequences for all those concerned of his not fulfilling this obligation.

A central theme in Kauffeld's paper is that one component of presumptive inference is the supposition that some agent, A , who has an obligation to perform some action, x , will perform that action rather than risk resentment for not doing so. By way of comment I would say that if the agent thinks his having an obligation to perform that action gives him a reason to perform it, the reason he thinks it gives him may be any one of a number of different possible reasons. It need not be, though of course it may be, that he risks incurring resentment if he does not perform the action. This being so, I think it is not the case that Kauffeld's risk of resentment supposition is a necessary component of presumptive inferences of the kind that are the topic of his paper.

A final comment. My example about Mary and her physics test is a presumptive inference whose conclusion is the prediction that she will study for the test today. The inference does not involve the supposition that she has an obligation or other commitment to do this. Or, to be more cautious, it need not be interpreted in that way. This shows that, contrary to Kauffeld's account, an obligation-or-other-commitment supposition is not a necessary component of presumptive inferences.

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