

## THE SCOPE AND LIMITS OF THE NO MIRACLES ARGUMENT<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I review the scope and limits of the no miracles argument. I defend and, where necessary, revise my account of it as a way to justify Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE).

### 1

I have argued in my (1999, chapter 4) that the no miracles argument (NMA) should be seen as a grand IBE. The way I read it, NMA is a philosophical argument which aims to defend the reliability of scientific methodology in producing approximately true theories. More specifically, I took it that NMA is a two-part (or two-stage) argument. Here is its structure.

#### **NMA**

##### (A)

(A1) Scientific methodology is theory-laden.

(A2) These theory-laden methods lead to correct predictions and experimental success (instrumental reliability).

How are we to explain this?

(C1) The best explanation (of the instrumental reliability of scientific methodology) is this: the statements of the theory which assert the specific causal connections or mechanisms in virtue of which methods yield successful predictions are approximately true.<sup>2</sup>

##### (B)

(B1/C1) Theories are approximately true.

(B2) These background scientific theories have themselves been typically arrived at by abductive reasoning.

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1 Many thanks to two anonymous readers for comments.

2 This somewhat cumbersome formulation is meant to highlight that the application IBE should be local and selective rather than global and undifferentiated. Only those parts of a theory that do play some role in the generation of the theory's successes do get some credit from the explanation of these successes. For all practical purposes, however, the conclusion (C1) might be abbreviated thus: the best explanation of the instrumental reliability of scientific methodology is that background theories are approximately true.

(C2) Therefore, (it is reasonable to believe that) abductive reasoning is reliable: it tends to generate approximately true theories.

Given this structure, it is clear that NMA aims to defend the reliability of IBE, as a mode of reasoning. Note that the explanandum, viz., the *instrumental* reliability of scientific methodology, is distinct from the explanans, viz., the reliability (in Goldman's sense) inference to the best explanation. As Arthur Fine aptly put it, instrumental reliability is a feature of scientific theories in virtue of which they are 'useful in getting things to work for the practical and theoretical purposes for which we might put them to use' (1991, 86). It has mostly to do with getting predictions right and with leading to empirical successes. Reliability, in the sense it is understood by epistemological externalists, is a property of a method by virtue of which it tracks the truth—that is, it tends to generate true conclusions when fed with true premises. This important distinction is confused in Jacob Busch's (2008) and a lot that follows misses the point.

It is transparent that the NMA has two conclusions (one for each part of it). The *first* (C1) is that we should accept as (approximately) true the theories that are implicated in the (best) explanation of the *instrumental* reliability of first-order scientific methodology. The *second* (C2) is that since, typically, these theories have been arrived at by means of IBE, IBE is reliable (truth-conducive). Both conclusions are necessary for fulfilling the aim of NMA.

## 2

A straightforward observation is that sub-argument (B) is not circular. It is *not* an instance of IBE, anyway. (B2) is a factual premise: it is meant to state a fact about how theories have been generated and accepted. It can certainly be contested. But all that matters for (C2) to follow is this:

If (C1) is true, then given a factual premise (B2), (C2) is true.

There is a missing premise, of course, viz., that if a method yields approximately true theories, this method is reliable. But this is how reliability is understood. It might be objected that all that is shown—at best—is that IBE has been reliable; not that it will be; and hence, not that it is reliable, *simpliciter*. That is fine, however. No-one claims that the problem of induction is thereby solved.

Suppose, for the sake of the argument, that (B) has a different form. For instance, here is a reconstruction of it, motivated by Busch's (2008).

(B\*)

(C1/B1) Theories are approximately true.

(B2\*) These theories have been typically produced by (or have been accepted on the basis of) IBE.

What is the best explanation of the connection between IBE and truth?

(C2) That IBE is reliable.

I do not think this is the right way to reconstruct my argument, the reason being that the claim that IBE is reliable does *not* explain (in this context) the connection between IBE and truth; it just sums it up. But even if it were the right way, (B\*) would be an instance of IBE and not *ipso facto* circular.

How about (A) then? This is not circular either. It is an instance of IBE, but there is no reason to think that instances of IBE, in and of themselves, are circular. This clearly isn't.

Yet, the argument *as a whole* has an air of circularity. It employs/uses IBE while its (second) conclusion states that IBE (the rule or method employed at least partly for the generation of this conclusion) is reliable. Well and truly. Is this circularity vicious?

### 3

*Vicious* circularity is an epistemic charge—a viciously circular argument has no epistemic force. It cannot offer reasons to believe the conclusion. It cannot be persuasive. This has to be right. If the charge of circularity were logical and not epistemic, (if that is, a circular argument lacked validity altogether and not just epistemic force), all deductive arguments would be viciously circular. There is an obvious sense in which all deductive arguments are such that the conclusion is 'contained' in the premises—and this grounds/explains their logical validity. Hence, deductive arguments can be circular without being *viciously* circular. And similarly, *some* deductive arguments are *viciously* circular, (without thereby being invalid),—for instance: if Socrates is mortal, then Socrates is mortal; Socrates is mortal; therefore Socrates is mortal.

Premise-circularity (where the conclusion is explicitly one of the premises) is always and everywhere vicious! It cannot possibly have any epistemic force for someone who does not already accept the conclusion. NMA, insofar as it is circular, is *not* premise-circular. (C2) is *not* among the premises of (B). And (C1) is *not* among the premises of (A).

There is, however, another kind of circularity. This, as Braithwaite (1953, 276) put it “is the circularity involved in the use of a principle of inference being justified by the truth of a proposition which can only be established by the use of the same principle of inference”. It can be called rule-circularity. In general, an argument has a number of premises  $P_1, \dots, P_n$ . *Qua* argument, it rests on (employs/uses) a rule of inference  $R$ , by virtue of which a certain conclusion  $Q$  follows. It may be that  $Q$  has a certain content: it asserts or implies something about the rule of inference  $R$  *used* in the argument; in particular that  $R$  is reliable. So: rule-circular arguments are such that the argument itself is an instance, or involves

essentially an application, of the rule of inference whose reliability is asserted in the conclusion.

If anything, NMA is rule-circular (though in an oblique sense). Part (A) yields a conclusion (C1), such that it together with another premise (B2) yield another conclusion (C2), whose content is that the rule by means of which (C1) was arrived at is reliable. The pertinent question is whether rule-circularity is vicious. Obviously, rule circularity is *not* premise-circularity. But, one may wonder, is it still vicious in not having any epistemic force in some sense?

In my (1999), I tied this issue to the prospects of epistemological naturalism and externalism. In effect, I argued that NMA proceeds within a broad naturalistic framework in which the charge of circularity loses its bite because what is sought is not justification of inferential methods and practices (at least in the neo-Cartesian internalist sense) but their explanation and defence (in the epistemological externalist sense). It's not as if NMA should persuade a committed opponent of realism to change sides. But it can explain to all those who employ IBE, in virtue of what it is reliable; and it can possibly sway all those who are neutral on this issue.

I now think, however, that this kind of externalist defence of NMA is too narrow. What we should be after are *reasons to believe* that IBE is reliable (and not just an assertion to the effect that *if* indeed IBE is reliable, and we are externalists about justification, we are home and dry). Externalism does have a point. Reliability is a property of a rule of inference which the rule possesses (or fails to possess) independently of the reasons we have for thinking that it does (or does not). This is the point behind my claim that "NMA does not *make* IBE reliable. Nor does it add anything to its reliability, if it happens to be reliable" (1999, 83). Where I was wrong was in what immediately followed: "[NMA] merely generates a new belief about the reliability of IBE which is justified just in case IBE is reliable". NMA *does* generate a new belief (about the reliability of IBE) but this belief is not justified "just in case IBE is reliable". This is too externalist. I now think that NMA *justifies* this belief too. To see this, let us ask the broader (and interesting) question: can IBE be justified?

#### 4

Obviously, this question has a fine structure. It depends on how exactly we understand IBE and how exactly we understand the call for justification. I have dealt with the first issue in some detail in my (2007). So I will limit myself to a few general comments towards the end of the paper. Let me focus on the second issue and let us ask again: can IBE be justified? If the answer is no, we end up with inferential scepticism. If the answer is yes, there are two options: non-inferential justification and inferential justification. A non-inferential justification of IBE, if

possible at all, would have to rely on some a priori rational insight. An inferential justification of IBE would have to rely on some rule of inference.

There are obvious problems with all three options.

1. Scepticism leaves us in an inferential vacuum, which is hardly plausible.
2. Non-inferential justification presupposes something whose existence is dubious (rational insight).
3. Inferential justification has to rely on a rule of inference. If the rule is distinct, there is the issue of how the two rules are inferentially connected. If the rule is the self-same, we end up in rule-circularity.

The good news is that this is not a conceptual tangle that arises only in the case of IBE. It spills over to more basic forms of ampliative reasoning as well as to deductive logic. So IBE is in good company. Let's call this 'the good company argument'.

## 5

In the case of the justification of *modus ponens* (or any other genuinely fundamental rule of logic), if logical scepticism is to be forfeited, there are two options available: either non-inferential justification or inferential (rule-circular) justification. There is no non-inferential justification of *modus ponens*. Therefore, there is only rule-circular justification.

Indeed, any attempt to justify *modus ponens* by means of an argument has to employ *modus ponens* itself (see Dummett 1974). Why is there no non-inferential justification of *modus ponens*? There are many routes to this conclusion, but two stand out. The first is Quine's argument against basing logic on conventions; the second is that if non-inferential justification is meant to amount to default-reasonableness, we may well end up with a form of relativism, since what counts as default-reasonable might vary from one community to another. (For more on this, see Boghossian 2000). It follows that the rule-circular justification of IBE is in good company—with all basic forms of reasoning (including, of course, enumerative induction).

## 6

But couldn't *any* mode of reasoning (no matter how crazy or invalid) be justified by rule-circular arguments? Take for instance what may be called (due to Igor Douven) *Inference to the Worst Explanation*.

(IWE)

Scientific theories are generally quite unsuccessful  
 These theories are arrived at by application of IWE

What is the worst explanation of this?  
That IWE is a reliable rule of inference

Let's call this, following Boghossian (2000, 245) *the bad company objection*. How can it be avoided? The reply here is that the employment of rule-circular arguments rests on or requires the absence of specific reasons to doubt the reliability of a rule of inference. We can call this, the *Fair-Treatment Principle*: a doxastic/inferential practice is innocent until proven guilty. This puts the onus on those who want to show guilt. I take this to be a fundamental epistemic principle. To motivate it properly would require much more space than I have now. But the basic idea is this. Traditional foundationalism has been tied to active justification, viz., to the active search for reasons for holding a belief. So any belief is suspect unless there is some good reason to hold it. The search for independent reasons for holding the belief is then necessary for its justification, since without them there is no way to ensure that the belief is rationally held. There are many reasons why active justification is too strong a condition on the rationality of belief. But in any case, there is an alternative picture of epistemology, what Gilbert Harman (1999) has called 'general conservatism'. According to this picture, no belief requires active justification in the absence of well-motivated objections to it. The rationale for this is that justification has to start from somewhere and there is no other point to start apart from where we currently are, that is from our current beliefs and inferential practices. Accordingly, unless there are specific reasons to doubt the reliability of IBE, there is no reason to forego its uses in justificatory arguments. Nor is there reason to search for an active justification of it. Things are obviously different with IWE, since there are plenty of reasons to doubt its reliability, the chief being that typically the worst explanations (whatever that means) of the explananda are not truthlike; not to mention the fact that the first premise of IWE is false.

It may be further objected that even if the *Fair-Treatment Principle* permits the employment of certain inferential rules, it fails to give us reasons to *rely* on them. I am not sure positive reasons, as opposed to the absence of reasons to doubt, are required for the employment of a rule. But in any case, it can be argued that there are some proto-reasons for the use of certain basic inferential rules. Do not forget that our basic inferential rules (including IBE, of course) are rules we value. And we value them because they are *our* rules, that is rules we employ and rely upon to form beliefs. Part of the reason why we value these rules is that they have tended to generate true beliefs—hence we have some reason to think they are reliable, or at least more reliable than competing rules (say IWE). So even if it is accepted that the employment of rule-circular arguments in favour of an inferential rule does require the presence of reasons to take the rule seriously, there are such reasons.

## 7

We can pursue the issue of justification by means of rule-circular arguments a bit further, by raising the issue of whether there are intuitive constraints on justification which rule-circular arguments violate.

Suppose one were to say:

(J)

No use of rule R is justified unless *X*.

What could *X* be such that rule-circular arguments violate it? The only plausible candidate for *X* which would be violated by a rule-circular argument is: R's reliability-relevant properties are proved/supported by an independent argument. So

(J\*)

No use of rule R is justified unless R's reliability-relevant properties are proved or supported by an independent argument.

Even then, there is a sense in which a rule-circular argument *is* an independent argument, since it can have epistemic force for someone who has no views about the rules they employ. In other words, an independent argument need *not* be an argument of a different form. Still, this is *weak independence*, since the users of R are *disposed* to use it, even if they have no views about it. What if we opted for a strong sense of independence?

(SI)

An argument for the reliability-relevant properties of R is strongly independent if it is either different in form from R or it can sway someone who is not already disposed to using R to start using it (or to acquire this disposition).

Note that the first disjunct of this condition is question-begging. But, suppose it is not. If we take it seriously, as noted already, it would be impotent as a criterion for the justification of a basic rule of inference, since no basic inferential rule can be justified by the application of another (distinct in character) rule. Inferential scepticism would follow suit. To see this, reflect on the following claim: no use of memory is justified unless the memory's reliability-relevant properties are proved/supported by a non-memory-based argument. Whatever this supposedly independent argument might look like, it will have to be, ultimately, memory-based, since it has to be remembered!

The second disjunct of (SI) is moot. A rule-circular argument might (conceivably) sway someone to become disposed to use this very rule. Alternatively, why should it be an intuitive requirement on justification of an inferential rule that it can rationally *force* someone to start using the rule? Suppose we do require something like this. Let's call it a condition of *extra strong independence*.



(ESI)

An argument for the reliability-relevant properties of R is extra strongly independent if and only if it can be used to sway a sceptic about R.

(ESI) is clearly *not* an intuitive constraint on justification, unless massive inferential scepticism is an intuitive position—which is not. Note, *a propos*, that nowhere is it said or implied that the use of a rule R is (or should be) rationally compelling—at least if by that it is meant that there are (or should be) arguments for R that can sway the sceptic. But, clearly, the use of a rule R and its justification on the basis of a non-sceptic-suasive rule-circular argument are rationally permitted.

## 8

In a recent piece Valeriano Iranzo (2008) has raised further objections to my formulation of the NMA. He grants part (A) of the argument (see section 1 above), but claims that my part (B) could in fact be replaced by the following:

(I)

(I1) Background theories are approximately true (a fortiori, they are approximately empirically adequate).

(I2) Background theories have been arrived at by IBE.

(\*) An inference is instrumentally reliable iff it yields a high rate of empirically adequate conclusions.

(I3) Therefore, IBE is instrumentally reliable.

This, he argues, is a version of NMA suitable for anti-realists, since it rests on a weaker premise (\*) and draws a weaker conclusion than (B). Clearly (\*), *qua* a definition of instrumental reliability, is weaker than the definition of reliability required for (B). Iranzo takes it that this anti-realist version of NMA is broadly within the reliabilist camp, since it defends the instrumental *reliability* of IBE. But then he goes on to claim that once (I) is seen as an option, the conclusion (I3) should lead us to *replace* the first premise (I1) with the following weaker premise:

(I1\*) Background theories are empirically adequate.

There is something strange going on here. Iranzo's anti-realist NMA is a self-undermining argument. Its conclusion (I1\*) weakens one of the premises that led to it, viz., (I1). If Iranzo grants part (A) of the argument, as he says he does, there are reasons to accept premise (I1), [C1 in my formulation of (A) in section 1], which in fact is the conclusion of (A). That is, there are reasons (best-explanation based reasons) to accept that background theories are approximately true and a fortiori that they are approximately empirically adequate. But, by plugging (I1) into (I) we are entitled, according to Iranzo, only to part of the content of the



premise (I1), viz., its part which has to do with the empirical adequacy of theories. I think this situation borders with incoherence. The point is not that we may find out that only part of the content of a premise was necessary for the derivation of a certain conclusion. This is fine, of course. The problem is that the very reason for holding the weakened premise (I1\*) was the stronger premise (I1). In particular, the very reason for holding that background theories are approximately empirically adequate is that this follows from the conclusion of (A) that they are approximately true. So, I doubt that (I) is a coherently formulated argument.

There *is* a coherent anti-realist version of NMA, but to see it we need to change part (A) of the argument too. So:

*AR-NMA*

(AR-A)

(A1) Scientific methodology is theory-laden.

(A2) These theory-laden methods lead to correct predictions and experimental success (instrumental reliability).

How are we to explain this?

(AR-C1) The best explanation (of the instrumental reliability of scientific methodology) is that background theories are (approximately) empirically adequate.

(AR-B)

(AR-B1) Background theories are (approximately) empirically adequate.

(I2) Background theories have been arrived at by IBE.

(\*) An inference is instrumentally reliable iff it yields a high rate of empirically adequate conclusions.

(I3) Therefore, IBE is instrumentally reliable.

Note that (AR-NMA) takes it that (A) defends empirical adequacy as the best explanation of instrumental reliability background theories. Then, it proceeds by drawing the further (weaker) conclusion that IBE is instrumentally reliable. What is wrong with (AR-NMA)? If we take seriously the obligation/permission distinction noted above, it is a rationally permitted argument. However, in this coherent formulation of (AR-NMA), the issue between it and NMA is whether (C1) or (AR-C1) is the best explanation of the instrumental reliability of background theories. In other words, is truth or empirical adequacy the best explanation? No much progress can be made on this front—though I still think that truth is a better explanation than empirical adequacy, for the reasons noted already in my (1999, chapter 4).

Perhaps some progress can be made if we take a different line of argument. (AR-NMA) wavers between two formulations, depending on how we read premise (AR-B1):

(AR-B1\*) Background theories are, *at least*, empirically adequate.

(AR-B1\*\*) Background theories are, *at most*, empirically adequate (and false).

Obviously (AR-B1\*), plugged into (AR-B), licenses the conclusion that IBE is *at least* instrumentally reliable. This opens up the further question of whether it is reliable, *simpliciter*, and what follows is that (AR-NMA) becomes compatible with the realist NMA. Equally obviously, (AR-B1\*\*), plugged into (AR-B), licenses the conclusion that IBE is *at most* instrumentally reliable and unreliable *simpliciter*. But then it becomes flatly question-begging.

## 9

Is the rule-circular justification of IBE empty? It might be argued that a rule-circular justification cannot possibly fail to justify IBE. Let's try to capture this, by *the not-sure thing principle*:

A rule-circular justification of a rule R should be such that the proof of the possession by the rule of the reliability relevant properties should not be a sure thing.

In other words, there should be at least a *prima facie* risk that the rule-circular argument won't vindicate R.

I am not sure this is a good principle, but that NMA does take some risk is obvious—especially since (C1) might not be the right conclusion to draw. The very possibility of (AR-NMA) shows that there is a choice between (C1) and (AR-C1) and that whether one or the other offers the best explanation of the instrumental reliability of scientific methodology is a substantive issue. Besides, B2 might be contested: it's a substantive truth, if anything, that theories have been arrived at by IBE. So, C2 might be false.

Another related worry might be that the foregoing rule-circular justification is empty because it has no probative epistemic force. Let's capture this by the *why-bother-to-play-the-game principle*:

A rule-circular justification of a rule R should be such that it has some epistemic force vis-à-vis those who are either disposed to use R or are not full-blown sceptics about R.

As noted already, the NMA does have some such force. It explains the presence and stability of these dispositions, systematises what inferential patterns they follow and explains why they are reliable.

## 10

In his critique of my version of NMA, John Worrall (this volume) takes the line that NMA is not an argument proper but rather an *intuition*—the one that drives home the idea that it is incredible or unlikely that theories yield novel predictions and yet they are entirely off the mark. I certainly agree with Worrall that novel predictions play a crucial role in NMA and the defence of realism. But is it right to claim that NMA is nothing over and above the union of several individual abductions—viz., those abductions that have led to the adoption of individual scientific theories? I am afraid it is not. Part (B) of NMA is necessary because clearly the union of first-order abduction says nothing of their reliability. Part (B) offers fresh information about the reliability of IBE—and hence of its properly employed instances. Moreover, part (B) supports certain counterfactuals which are not licensed by the union of first-order IBEs. Given (B), it could be argued, for instance, that had scientists adopted hypothesis X instead of hypothesis Y on the grounds that X offered (even by their lights) a better explanation of evidence than Y, they would have been closer to the truth. In any case, is the no-miracles an intuition or an argument? That it is not an argument rests only on prejudice; on thinking that only deductive arguments are proper arguments. NMA might not be a *good* argument (though I think it is). But insofar as there is such thing as ampliative reasoning, NMA is a proper defeasible argument.

## 11

The NMA has played a key role in the explanationist defence of realism. I now think, however, that the defence it offers to realism is limited. The NMA is not an argument for scientific realism; that is, it's not an argument for the *truth* of realism. The details are offered in my (forthcoming). Scientific realism is *not* a theory; it's a framework which makes possible certain ways of viewing the world. Scientific realism lacks all the important features of a scientific theory. So, the problem lies in the thought that scientific realism can be supported by the same type of argument that scientific theories are supported. This is a tempting, but flawed, thought, the reason being that the very idea of counting empirical success as being in favour of the truth of a scientific theory—the very idea of evidence making a theory probable, or the very idea that a theory is the best explanation of the evidence, and the like—presupposes that theories are already placed *within* the realist framework. For the NMA to work at all, it is presupposed that explanation—and in particular explanation by postulation—matters and that scientific theories should be assessed and evaluated on explanatory grounds. Hence, the no miracles argument works within the *realist* framework; it's not an argument *for* it. It presupposes rather than establishes the realist framework. Still, *within* the realist framework, NMA has an

important role to play, and this, as I still think, is to offer a justification of inference to the best explanation.

## 12

In what has preceded, I have taken IBE for granted without explaining what exactly it is and how it works. Here again, the details are offered in my (2009). To a good approximation, IBE has the following abstract form:

- D is a collection of data (facts, observations, givens).
- H explains D (would, if true, explain D)
- No other hypothesis can explain D as well as H does.

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- Therefore, H is probably true.

But it is best to see IBE as an inferential genus. The several species of the genus IBE are distinguished, among other things, by plugging assorted conceptions of explanation in the reasoning schema that constitutes the genus. For instance, if the relevant notion of explanation is causal, IBE becomes an inference to the best causal explanation. Or, if the relevant notion of explanation is subsumption under laws, IBE becomes a kind of inference to the best nomological explanation, and so forth. What is also worth stressing is that first-order IBE-type of reasoning has a fine-structure that is shaped, by and large, by the context. For instance, the context can settle what the relevant explanatory relation is; it can (in most typical cases) determine the ranking of the rival explanations; it can settle what assumptions must be in place for the best explanation to be acceptable; it can settle what to watch out for (or search) before the best explanation is accepted (e.g., the absence of certain possible defeaters).

Contextual factors can link explanation and truth quite closely because, far from aiming to forge an abstract connection between them, they make this connection stand or fall together with the richness and specificity of the relevant information available. The key idea behind IBE is that explanatory considerations guide inference. But, within a more contextual approach, there is a sense in which the crucial conclusion (C1) of NMA acquires extra strength. For now (C1) gets support from countless context-dependent first-order abductions which yield true beliefs about the micro-constituents of the world.

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