Inference to the Best Explanation
Phil 232 Philosophy of Science
Thursday 2:00-4:50, Dodd 325

Description

Inference to the best explanation is a familiar form of inference by which we come to believe (or to be more confident in) whichever theory best explains our data.

Suppose, for example, I come home to discover that my leather shoes have been torn to bits and are covered with what appears to be drool and teeth marks. One explanation for the state of my shoes is that my dog chewed on them. An alternative explanation for the state of my shoes is that my neighbors broke into my house, destroyed my shoes, and framed my dog. When I discover that my shoes have been destroyed, I infer the first option over the second on the grounds that the first option is a better explanation for the state of my shoes than is the second option.

This class will discuss inference to the best explanation: its content, its justification, and its implications. We will be particularly interested in inference to the best explanation's role in justifying our beliefs about the unobservable features of our world.

Along the way, we will have fun. No particular familiarity with the topic is presupposed.

Grading

Everyone taking the class for credit will turn in two papers and give one in-class presentation. The paper assignments are:

1. 1 6-8 page paper.
   AND
2a. 1 6-8 page paper on a new topic.
   or
2b. 1 13-16 page paper on your old topic.
   or
2c. 1 13-16 page paper on a new topic.

The class presentation will be 20-30 minutes of you talking to us about your papers, and 20-30 minutes of Q&A.

You first paper is due in class on Week 6. Your second paper due date is pending. You class presentation will be during our last meeting.
If you’re taking the class S/U, you’ll write 1 6-8 page paper due in week 6.

Reading Schedule

Section 1: A Few Threads of Debate

Week 1: Describing the Inference

Week 2: Justifying the Inference—opening issues.

Week 3: Applications: Realism/Anti-realism

Week 4: Applications: Underdetermination

Week 5: IBE and Bayesian Confirmation Theory

Paper Due Week 6

Section 2: More Recent Work

At this point, we will have collected a number of issues surrounding IBE. As a group, we will make a decision about which of these threads we’d prefer to pursue. Then, we will read recent work on one or two of those threads.
Readings

All readings are posted on the course website. If you would like access to the website, but are not enrolled in the class, please send me an email.