Accommodation, Inference, Generics & Pejoratives

Greg Restall

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

MELBOURNE SOCIAL ONTOLOGY WORKSHOP · 12 OCTOBER 2018
To give an account of norms governing our uses of *generics*, and our *inferring*, showing how phenomena of *accommodation* can help explain the behaviour of generic judgements and pejorative uses of expressions.
The Wider Setting

This is a part of a collaborative research project *Constructing Social Hierarchy*, exploring anti-individualist approaches to mind, language and action, aiming to understand how we construct and maintain social hierarchies, so that we can better remedy social injustice.

The team: Sally Haslanger, Karen Jones, Laura Schroeter, François Schroeter, me.

Thanks to the Australian Research Council, for funding supporting this research (DP180103687).
Motivation & Background
Generics & Inference
Accommodation & Inference
The Semantics of Pejoratives
Options for Critique & Reform
MOTIVATION & BACKGROUND
Problem 1: Generics

Birds lay eggs.
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Logic talks are boring.
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Mosquitos transmit Ross River Fever.
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Cows are food.
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Men are aggressive.

Muslims are terrorists.
Fs are Gs
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... are pervasive.
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... are pervasive.

... are basic.
Fs are Gs

... are pervasive.

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... behave very strangely.
Mosquitos transmit RRF — what does this mean?

All mosquitos transmit RRF.

Some don’t.

Some mosquitos transmit RRF.

True, but some mosquitos don’t, and we won’t say “Mosquitos don’t transmit RRF.”

Most mosquitos transmit RRF.

Most don’t.

Normal mosquitos transmit RRF.

Male mosquitos don’t. They aren’t normal?

Mosquitos are the kind of thing that transmit RRF.

They’re also the kind of thing that doesn’t—e.g. males, or those in Africa.
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Background 1: “Inferentialism”, broadly construed

Inferentialism: an approach to semantics that takes meaning to centre on norms of inference.

Normative pragmatics: an approach to semantics that takes semantics to centre on norms of use (perhaps including inference, perhaps not).

My recent research concentrates on the connections between normative pragmatics and logic, via proof theory.
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\begin{align*}
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\hline
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Using *Boche* in this way encodes a substantial connection between being German, and being cruel.
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Using *Boche* in this way encodes a substantial connection between being German, and being cruel.

What does *Boche* mean, when it’s used like this?
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\[ \chi \text{ is a talk on proof theory} \quad \chi \text{ is a } \text{logic} \text{ talk} \]

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\[ x \text{ is a talk on proof theory} \quad \rightarrow \quad x \text{ is a } \textit{logic} \text{ talk} \]

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Are these inferences a part of the *meaning* of the pejorative expression?
Background 2: Semantics, Metasemantics and Practice

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- **SEMANTICS**: accounts of the meanings of particular expressions.

- **METASEMANTICS**: an account of the space of possible meanings, and the different ways expressions can get their meanings.

- **PRACTICE**: Metasemantics, in particular, can be a partner for clarificatory and emancipatory possibilities for revising our languages and our practices.
GENERICS & INFERENCE
Truth Conditions?

There are *many* accounts of the truth conditions of the generic

Ks are F
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Ks are F

Any adequate account is *very* complicated.
Though there may be a further refinement or two needed, we can describe the circumstances under which a generic of the form ‘Ks are F’ is true as follows:

The counterinstances are negative, and:
If F lies along a characteristic dimension for the Ks, then some Ks are F, unless K is an artifact or social kind, in which case F is the function or purpose of the kind K;
If F is striking, then some Ks are F and the others are disposed to be F;
Otherwise, almost all Ks are F.

The Approach I’ll Explore

We don’t *understand* a generic by first grasping its truth conditions.
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We don’t understand a generic by first grasping its truth conditions.

We learn to use generics by learning norms for how to use them.
I take it that this sort of account makes sense of how we understand modal terms like *possibly* and *necessarily*.
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“Possibly p” and “Necessarily p” have truth conditions expressed in terms of possible worlds, but we don’t learn the concepts of possibility and necessity by way of some prior access to possible worlds.
To say that a state of affairs obtains is just to say that something is the case; to say that something is a possible state of affairs is just to say that something could be the case; and to say that something is the case ‘in’ a possible state of affairs is just to say that the thing in question would necessarily be the case if that state of affairs obtained, i.e. if something else were the case...

We understand ‘truth in states of affairs’ because we understand ‘necessarily’; not vice versa.

But what *do* they mean?

*The problem remains:*  
What are the norms governing generics?  
How do we understand them?
Let’s change tack for a moment.
Inferring is an action

Consider the difference:

Tweety is a bird. Tweety flies.

Tweety is a bird.

So, Tweety flies.

There is a difference between making two assertions, and making one assertion to give a reason for another.
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Reason giving appears in question answering
Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.
Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

ABELARD: Does Tweety fly?
ELoise: Yes, she’s a bird.
Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

ABELARD: Does Tweety fly?

ELOISE: Yes, she’s a bird.

This is beef. So, this is food.
Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

ABELARD: Does Tweety fly?
ELOISE: Yes, she’s a bird.

This is beef. So, this is food.

ABELARD: Is this food?
ELOISE: Yes, it’s beef.
ABELARD: Does she have stripes?
ELOISE: Yes, she’s a zebra.
Reason giving can go in both directions

ABELARD: Does she have stripes?
ELOISE: Yes, she’s a zebra.

ABELARD: Is she a zebra?
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Reason giving can go in both directions

ABELARD: Does she have stripes?
ELOISE: Yes, she’s a zebra.

ABELARD: Is she a zebra?
ELOISE: Yes, she has stripes.

Each direction can make sense, given an appropriate context.
ELOISE: She has stripes.
ABELARD: Why?
ELOISE: She’s a zebra.
So can explanation

ELOISE: She has stripes.
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Each direction can make sense, given an appropriate context.
What is inference?

... or rather, what are we doing when we infer or explain?
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... or rather, what are we *doing* when we infer or explain?

- I won’t commit myself to any particular analysis of the norms governing inference and explanation. (c.f. Brandom, in *Making it Explicit*, and his view of the relationship between inference, commitment and entitlement.)
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- These are *speech acts*, like *assertion*. (I can infer B from A despite believing B before believing A. Inferring, in this sense, isn’t believing on the basis of. The same goes for explaining or justifying.)
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    (I can *infer* B *from* A despite believing B *before* believing A. Inferring, in this sense, isn’t *believing on the basis of*. The same goes for explaining or justifying.)

- Making an inference is also not to be identified with offering a deductively valid argument, or taking yourself to do so.
Reason giving is defeasible, or non-monotonic:

Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.
Reason giving is defeasible, or non-monotonic:

Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

Tweety is a bird. *Tweety is a penguin*. So, Tweety flies.
Why infer?

Why *(do we/should we)* care about how our claims relate to one another?
Why infer?

Why *(do we/should we)* care about how our claims relate to one another?

Why not just care about whether A and B are true, and ignore whether A is *a reason* for B?
Why infer?

Why (do we/should we) care about how our claims relate to one another?

Why not just care about whether A and B are true, and ignore whether A is a reason for B?

(Or, why do children ask why instead of just asking whether?)
Why infer?

Why *(do we/should we)* care about how our claims relate to one another?

Why not just care about whether A and B are true, and ignore whether A is *a reason* for B?

(Or, why do children ask *why* instead of just asking *whether*)

Why attempt to keep track of how claims relate to one another?
Two reasons for having practices of inferring and explaining

If we find a zebra…

Suppose that's actually a zebra

Options for action

Options for belief

Subjunctive

Indicative

"Metaphysical"

"Epistemic"

It is hard to see how we could act on the basis of shared views without some kind of reason-giving practice.
Two reasons for having practices of inferring and explaining

PLANNING AND CONTINGENCY
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*Greg Restall* Accommodation, Inference, Generics & Pejoratives
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It is hard to see how we could *act* on the basis of *shared views* without some kind of reason-giving practice.
Claim 1: Generics make inferential transitions explicit

Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.
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Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

— Birds fly.
Claim 1: Generics make inferential transitions explicit

Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

— Birds fly.

She’s a zebra. So, she has stripes.
Claim 1: Generics make inferential transitions explicit

Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

— Birds fly.

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— Zebras have stripes.
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She has stripes. So, she’s a zebra.

— Striped things are zebras.
Claim 1: *Generics make inferential transitions explicit*

- Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.  
  — *Birds fly.*

- She’s a zebra. So, she has stripes.  
  — *Zebras have stripes.*

- She has stripes. So, she’s a zebra.  
  — *Striped things are zebras.*  
  — *Striped horses are zebras.*
Making inference explicit

I can make explicit my preparedness to infer \( G \) from \( F \) by saying

\( F \) are \( G \).
I can *make explicit* my preparedness to infer \( Gx \) from \( Fx \) or to *explain* \( Gx \) by way of \( Fx \) by saying

\[ Fs \text{ are } Gs. \]
This explains many of the distinctive features of generics

- *Exceptions:* **Birds fly.** *(Yes! Despite penguins.)*
This explains many of the distinctive features of generics

- **Exceptions**: *Birds fly*. *(Yes! Despite penguins.)*
  - *Tweety is a bird* is a good reason for *Tweety flies*, even if this does not apply to all birds.
This explains many of the distinctive features of generics

- **Exceptions**: **Birds fly**. (Yes! Despite penguins.)
  - **Tweety is a bird** is a good reason for **Tweety flies**, even if this does not apply to all birds.

- **Failure of weakening of the consequent**: **Birds lay eggs**. (Yes!) **Birds are female**. (No!)

- **Low rate generics with striking properties**: Mosquitos transmit **malaria**.
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  - Does Tweety lay eggs? Yes, **Tweety is a bird.** (Good!)

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  - **Tweety is a bird** is a good reason for **Tweety flies**, even if this does not apply to all birds.

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  - Does **Tweety lay eggs**? Yes, **Tweety is a bird**. (Good!)
  - Is **Tweety female**? Yes, **Tweety is a bird**. (????)
This explains many of the distinctive features of generics

- **Exceptions:** *Birds fly.* (Yes! Despite penguins.)
  - *Tweety is a bird* is a good reason for *Tweety flies*, even if this does not apply to all birds.

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  - Does *Tweety lay eggs?* Yes, *Tweety is a bird.* (Good!)
  - *Is Tweety female?* Yes, *Tweety is a bird.* (????)
  - Or, *Tweety lays eggs* since *Tweety is a bird.* (Good!)
  - *Tweety is female* since *Tweety is a bird.* (???)

- Low rate generics with striking properties: *Mosquitos transmit rrfs.*

- Given that reason giving does admit exceptions, in the case of striking/dangerous properties, it is much better to err on the side of false positives than false negatives. At the very least, we are happy to explain *This transmits rrfs* by granting this is a mosquito.
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- **Exceptions:** *Birds fly.* (Yes! Despite penguins.)
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  - Does Tweety lay eggs? **Yes, Tweety is a bird**. *(Good!)*
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  - **Tweety is female** since **Tweety is a bird**. *(????)*

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- **Low rate generics with striking properties**: Mosquitos transmit RRF.
  - Given that reason giving does admit exceptions, in the case of striking/dangerous properties, it is much better to err on the side of false positives than false negatives. At the very least, we are happy to explain This transmits RRF by granting this is a mosquito.
Why *this* form?

We can infer from any A to any B.

Why are generics, of the form $Fs \textit{ are } Gs$, so prevalent?
Why this form?

We can infer from any A to any B.

Why are generics, of the form $Fs$ are $Gs$, so prevalent?

In dialogue or in planning, the focus of inquiry is often fixed.

So, inferences of the form suitable for explication by a generic (from $Fx$ to $Gx$) are widespread.
Birds Fly

Cows Say Moo
Pigs Have Piglets

Monkeys Live in Trees
Why make inference explicit?

To teach and to refine.
Why make inference explicit?

To teach ...
Why make inference explicit?

To teach ...

... and to refine.
Training for Inference
We communicate and coordinate on inferences: if you’ve learned that birds fly, you’ll accept “x is a bird” as a reason to conclude “x flies,” or to explain “x flies” by appeal to “x is a bird.”
The information conveyed can be local.

Consider a zoo enclosure with a range of horse-like creatures: I might say “striped ones are zebras”.
Refining Inference

You can object to my inference

Fa. So, Ga.

in three different (related) ways:

(1) Deny Fa.

(2) Deny Ga.

(3) Deny the So.
Refining Inference

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1. Deny Fa.
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You can object to my inference
Fa. So, Ga.
in three different (related) ways:

(1) Deny Fa.  (2) Deny Ga.  (3) Deny the So.

We have words for (1) and (2).
How do you voice objection (3)?
Refining Inference

You can object to my inference
Fa. So, Ga.
in three different (related) ways:

(1) Deny Fa.   (2) Deny Ga.   (3) Deny the So.

We have words for (1) and (2).

How do you voice objection (3)?

Making inferences explicit
gives us a way to argue about them.
What is it to *deny* that birds fly?
What is it to deny that birds fly?

Birds don’t fly?
What is it to deny that birds fly?

Birds don’t fly?

Fs are non-Gs \quad not (Fs are Gs)

The grammar of generics makes denying them difficult.

We often move to more explicit quantification: many birds don’t fly, or not all birds fly.
The inferential analysis of generics explains this, too.

Resisting the inference from $Fx$ to $Gx$ does not, by itself, offer an alternative inference.
The inferential analysis of generics explains this, too

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Neither does it make much of a claim at all, by itself.
The inferential analysis of generics explains this, too

Resisting the inference from $Fx$ to $Gx$
does not, by itself, offer an alternative inference.

Neither does it make much of a claim at all, by itself.

We’ll return to this topic later.
ACCOMMODATION & INFEERENCE
The **COMMON GROUND** of a conversation at any given time is the set of propositions that the participants in that conversation at that time mutually assume to be taken for granted and not subject to (further) discussion.

— Kai von Fintel

“What is Presupposition Accommodation, Again?”

*Philosophical Perspectives*, 2008.
When uttered assertively, sentences are meant to update the common ground. If a sentence is accepted by the participants, the proposition it expresses is added to the common ground.

— Kai von Fintel

“What is Presupposition Accommodation, Again?”

Philosophical Perspectives, 2008.
Another way to enter the common ground

If there are drinks after the seminar, my son will come.

When I say this, the proposition that I have a son (and perhaps that I have only one son) is added to the common ground.
Another way to enter the common ground

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This phenomenon is called presupposition accommodation.
Another way to enter the common ground

If there are drinks after the seminar, my son will come.

When I say this, the proposition that I have a son (and perhaps that I have only one son) is added to the common ground.

This phenomenon is called presupposition accommodation.

(The details of how—and which—presuppositions are accommodated is a matter of debate and active research.)
Rae Langton explores the ethical contours of accommodation phenomena in *Accommodating Injustice*.
Rae Langton explores the ethical contours of accommodation phenomena in *Accommodating Injustice*.

Sometimes we find ourselves committed to substantial claims we never explicitly considered. We have *accommodated* them.
Claim 2: Inference and the Common Ground

If you make the inference

$F_α$, therefore $G_α$, 

and you meet with no objection, then not only are $F_α$ and $G_α$ added to the common ground, but so is the generic: $F$s are $G$s.
If you make the inference
$Fa$, \textit{therefore} $Ga$,
\textit{and you meet with no objection},
Claim 2: Inference and the Common Ground

If you make the inference $Fa$, *therefore* $Ga$, and you meet with no objection, then not only are $Fa$ and $Ga$ added to the common ground,
If you make the inference $Fa$, *therefore* $Ga$, 
*and you meet with no objection*,
then not only are $Fa$ and $Ga$ added to the common ground, 
but so is the generic: $Fs$ are $Gs$. 
Of course ...

This could be highly local.

Recall: *she has stripes, so she’s a zebra.*
Of course ...

This could be highly local.

Recall: she has stripes, so she’s a zebra.

Striped things (here) are zebras.
This isn’t *presupposition* accommodation

The speech act of inference is *explicit*. It can be rejected, just as an assertion can.
This isn’t *presupposition* accommodation

The speech act of inference is *explicit*. It can be rejected, just as an assertion can.

I can *reject* the inference Fa, so Ga,
while *accepting* Fa and Ga.
The speech act of inference is *explicit*. It can be rejected, just as an assertion can.

I can *reject* the inference $F\alpha$, so $G\alpha$, while *accepting* $F\alpha$ and $G\alpha$.

Whether the inference is accepted or rejected should make *some* difference in the common ground.
This isn’t presupposition accommodation

The speech act of inference is explicit. It can be rejected, just as an assertion can.

I can reject the inference Fa, so Ga, while accepting Fa and Ga.

Whether the inference is accepted or rejected should make some difference in the common ground.

If the inference is made explicit by a generic this can do the job.
This commitment (Fs are Gs) goes beyond the explicit subject matter (the object a) under discussion.
Consequences

* This commitment (Fs are Gs) goes beyond the explicit subject matter (the object a) under discussion.

* Since generics are *generic*, they can persist, even after the details fade from attention.
Consequences

- This commitment (Fs are Gs) goes beyond the explicit subject matter (the object a) under discussion.

- Since generics are *generic*, they can persist, even after the details fade from attention.

- We can find ourselves accepting generics (and perhaps, *believing* them) without ever having explicitly considered them.
PEJORATIVES
\begin{align*}
\chi \text{ is German} \\
\chi \text{ is } \text{Boche}
\end{align*}
Pejorative Inference Pairs

\[ \chi \text{ is German} \]
\[ \chi \text{ is Boche} \]

\[ \chi \text{ is Boche} \]
\[ \chi \text{ is cruel} \]
Pejorative Inference Pairs

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{\(x\) is German} & \quad \text{\(x\) is Boche} \\
\text{\(x\) is Boche} & \quad \text{\(x\) is cruel} \\
\text{\(x\) is a talk on proof theory} & \quad \text{\(x\) is a \textit{logic} talk} \\
\text{\(x\) is a \textit{logic} talk} & \quad \text{\(x\) is boring}
\end{align*} \]
I make no claim about whether these inferences are somehow central to the meanings of the terms “Boche” or “logic talk”.
I make no claim about whether these inferences are somehow central to the meanings of the terms “Boche” or “logic talk”.

Though it seems that someone who uses “logic talk” pejoratively can talk with someone who doesn’t without necessarily being at cross purposes.
Pejoratives straightforwardly give rise to generics.

Germans are *Boche*. *Logic* talks are boring.
Striking properties and generics

Mosquitos transmit RRF.

Logic talks are boring.
Striking properties and generics

Mosquitos transmit RRF.

Logic talks are boring.

Muslims are terrorists.
Striking properties and generics

Mosquitos transmit RRF.

Logic talks are boring.

Muslims are terrorists.

These are hard to uproot, or to argue against.
Mosquitos transmit RRF.

Logic talks are boring.

Muslims are terrorists.

These are hard to uproot, or to argue against.

Not all mosquitos. Not all logic talks. Not all Muslims.
OPTIONS FOR CRITIQUE & REFORM
To reject or deny Fs are Gs, you need to undercut the inference from Fa to Ga and the practice of explaining Ga in terms of Fa.
How to deny a generic

- In a controlled environment, we can undercut the generic by being more specific, by moving to explicitly stated quantifiers.
How to deny a generic

- In a controlled environment, we can undercut the generic by being more *specific*, by moving to explicitly stated quantifiers.
  - Are *all* Fs Gs? Are *most*? How many?
How to deny a generic

- In a controlled environment, we can undercut the generic by being more *specific*, by moving to explicitly stated quantifiers.
  - Are *all* Fs Gs? Are *most*? How many?
- This can work, but it is hard to resist forming generic judgements. Syntactic discipline takes work.
How to deny a generic

- When $G$ is a striking property, it’s not enough to say that many or most $F$s are not $G$s.
How to deny a generic

- When G is a striking property, it’s not enough to say that many or most Fs are not Gs.

  (After all, most mosquitos don’t carry RRF.)
One way to undercut the inference from Fa to Ga is to institute a practice in which the question of whether something is G or not doesn’t arise.
How to deny a generic

- When we *care* about the property $G$, we won’t want to revise the concept away. So another approach is to find an *alternate* explanation for $G_a$, other than $F_a$. 
How to deny a generic

- When we *care* about the property $G$, we won’t want to revise the concept away. So another approach is to find an *alternate* explanation for $Ga$, other than $Fa$.
  - If not all species or genus of mosquito carry RRF, then we could refine our generic to the more specific one, that Mosquitos of genus *Culex* carry RRF, while agreeing that mosquitos outside that genus *don’t* carry RRF.
How to deny a generic

When we care about the property G, we won’t want to revise the concept away. So another approach is to find an alternate explanation for Ga, other than Fa.

- If not all species or genus of mosquito carry RRF, then we could refine our generic to the more specific one, that Mosquitos of genus *Culex* carry RRF, while agreeing that mosquitoes outside that genus don’t carry RRF.

- Explanations of this shape might undercut the generic Muslims are terrorists, by replacing them with better explanations — such as research showing that domestic violence is a much stronger predictor of involvement in terrorism.
How to deny a generic

- In any case, denying a generic requires changing not only our explicit theory, but our dispositions to infer.
- These dispositions is expressed not just in the claims we make. They are revealed in how we string those claims together.
The strange behaviour of generic judgements can be explained by their grounding in our inferential practice.

This helps us understand the difficulties and some of the possibilities for reforming and revising those practices and the views they represent.
THANK YOU!
Thank you!

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