Book of Abstracts

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Modus ponens and the contextualistic solution to the miners paradox

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The aim of this talk will be to present my original solution to a famous *miners paradox*, established by Niko Kolodny and John MacFarlane in their paper "Ifs and Oughts". The main premise of the paradox is that the miners are trapped in one of the two shafts and we cannot block either one of them to prevent the flood, since we do not know where they are and blocking of the wrong one would lead to unnecessary deaths. However, Kolodny and MacFarlane construct a counterexample that proves that the use of modus ponens will lead not only to a false conclusion, but also a contradictory one. In the case of trapped miners, conclusion will be that we ought to block one of the shafts, which contradicts the first premise that neither of the two shafts ought to be blocked. Kolodny and MacFarlane conclude that modus ponens is the cause of this type of contradictions.

I have noticed two fundamental problems with the premises presented by Kolodny and MacFarlane. They claim that the first premise ("We ought to block neither shaft.") is based on our moral obligations and thus indisputable. However, I shall try to point out that this premise can only be accepted as a conclusion of reasoning – the one already involving modus ponens. I shall claim that Kolodny and MacFarlane *need* to use modus ponens in order to construct such premise that would allow them further construction of the argument against modus ponens. If the argument is successful in proving that the use of modus ponens is wrong, it is such just because of the previous *correct* use of modus ponens.

Even bigger problem arises with second and third premise ("If the miners are in shaft *A/B*, we ought to block shaft *A/B*.") Kolodny and MacFarlane once again believe that these conditionals are undeniable; however, I shall claim that they are acceptable *only* in specific contexts. I shall try to prove that the paradox is based on a context switch, one that even Kolodny and MacFarlane are not aware of and that specifically this switch is the source of contradiction. Kolodny and MacFarlane deny the role of our knowledge (or, more precisely, the lack of it) of miners' whereabouts, but I believe that the knowledge is what creates the context and thus makes the premises either true or false.

In order to consolidate my case against miners paradox, I shall make a distinction between true and appropriate conditional premises. I shall analyze Kolodny's and MacFarlane's semantics in order to prove that although their premises can be considered as true according to such semantics, they are not necessarily *appropriate* for paradox. This distinction will be based on another one I will try to establish – between the complete and the incomplete conditional premises. A complete conditional premise is the one that includes *all* the true antecedents that are relevant for the context of the argument they are used in. I shall conclude that Kolodny and MacFarlane use the incomplete premises, which are inappropriate for the context of the paradox.