

The A Priori

1 Preliminaries

Defining A Priority

- BonJour says that two characteristics are definitive of a priority, one negative and one positive. The negative one is probably the more familiar:
 - “an a priori reason for thinking that a claim is true is one whose rational force or cogency does not derive from experience.” [BonJour, 2005, p.98]
 - This does seem at least closely related to Kant’s definition of the a priori in the *First Critique*: “In what follows, therefore, we shall understand by a priori knowledge, not knowledge independent of this or that experience, but knowledge absolutely independent of all experience. Opposed to it is empirical knowledge, which is knowledge possible only a posteriori, that is, through experience.” [A2/B3] And it’s also the definition that you’ll find in Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity* when he notes that many of the philosophers who came after Kant have been careless about distinguishing a priority from analyticity and necessity. (Roughly: something is a priori if it is known independently of experience, necessary if it could not have been otherwise, and analytic if it is true in virtue of meaning.)
 - What counts as experience? BonJour intends it to include: sense experience, including kinesthetic experience, but also introspective awareness of one’s own thoughts, sensations and mental states.
 - BonJour notes that this definition is meant to allow that experience could be needed in order to understand the claim being made; it’s the reason to believe the claim that has to be independent of experience:

That such a reason is independent of experience does *not* mean that someone who has undergone no experience of any sort could be in possession of it, since the possession of an a priori reason requires understanding the claim for which it is a reason, and experience, even experience of some fairly specific sort, might be required for that. [BonJour, 2005, p.99]
 - The positive condition on a priority:
 - “in the most basic cases such reasons result from direct or immediate insight into the truth, indeed the necessary truth, of the relevant claim.” [BonJour, 2005, p.100]

What are the objects of A priority?

- In ‘ordinary’ philosophical conversation, we often attribute a priority to, or deny it of, propositions. For example, we say
 - It is a priori *that* triangles have three sides.
 - The proposition that snow is white is a posteriori.

- But we don't *restrict* a priority and a posteriority attribution to propositions. We also say that things are *known* a priori or *justified* a priori, as if it is (instances of) knowledge, or justification that bear the property. BonJour also likes to say that *reasons* can be a priori (e.g. in his definition below.)
- Kripke points out in *Naming and Necessity* that the same proposition may be known a posteriori by one person, but a priori by another. For example, if you work out the sum in your head, but I get the answer by plugging it into a calculator, we might both end up believing that, say, $67+58 = 125$, but your knowledge is a priori, whereas mine is a posteriori. So if we're speaking about some agent's knowledge, we might say something like 'that's a priori *for him*.' [Kripke, 1980]
- These examples suggest that a priority and a posteriority are in the first place properties of reasons or justifications for belief, and then derivatively properties of propositions, beliefs, instances of knowledge etc. A belief/proposition/instance of knowledge will be said to be a priori just in case its justification is a priori. (If we want to put this in a slogan that people who haven't heard all this before will find almost incomprehensible, we can say: reasons or justifications are *primary bearers* of a priority.)
- Kripke also notes that we use *a priori* unrelativised to a speaker when we say things like "The knowable truths of arithmetic are a priori" and "all the interesting truths about soil respiration are a posteriori." He suggests what is happening here is that we say that a proposition is a priori simpliciter just in case there is at least one a priori justification of the proposition.
- Hence the objects of a priority are justifications, or reasons.

Equipping A priori Justification for the Modern World

- fallibilism: a proposition may be a priori justified and *false*.

How could this happen? You might have thought that if you have an a priori justification—say a proof—of some proposition, then the proposition just has to be true; after all, you have a proof. And if it is not a proof, then it isn't really justifying.

An example of fallible a priori justification? Perhaps you were asked to list all the proper subsets of the set $\{1, 2, 3\}$. You write: $\{1\}, \{2\}, \{3\}, \{1, 2\}, \{2, 3\}, \{1, 3\}$ and then have the a priori insight that you've covered all the ways to mix up the three numbers into distinct subsets—you haven't missed any combinations out, and this gives you an a priori reason to believe *that these are all the proper subsets of $\{1, 2, 3\}$* .

Of course, you've forgotten that the empty set is a subset of $\{1, 2, 3\}$, and so you're wrong—these aren't all the proper subsets. Even so, you had an a priori justification for your belief.

- defeasibility: including defeasibility by a posteriori stuff

So is there any a priori justification? Some Options:

Rationalism (BonJour)

The view that *some* of our beliefs are justified a priori (and are not analytic.)

Moderate Empiricism (Hume, the Positivists)

Some of our beliefs are justified a priori, but all such beliefs are *analytic*.

BonJour characterises this as a version of empiricism “that concedes the existence of a priori reasons of a sort, but claims that when properly understood, such reasons do not have the epistemological and metaphysical significance that is attributed to them by the rationalist. Instead, according to this moderate empiricist view, a priori reasons, rather than constituting insights into reality, reflect only linguistic or conceptual conventions or a merely matters of definition.” [BonJour, 2005, p.103]

Radical Empiricism (John Stuart Mill, Quine, Devitt)

No proposition is justified a priori.

2 The Arguments from Troublesome Cases

Logical truths, mathematical truths, conceptual truths

1. $2+3=5$
2. All cubes have 12 edges.
3. For any propositions P and Q, if it is true that P or Q and it is false that P, then it is true that Q.
4. If A is larger than B and B is larger than C, then A is larger than C.
5. No surface can be uniformly red and uniformly blue at the same time.

“Anyone who understands and thinks carefully about each of these propositions will be able to see or grasp immediately that it must be true, that it is true in any possible world or situation...this sort of seeing or grasping constitutes, other things being equal, a good, indeed overwhelmingly compelling, reason for thinking that the claim in question is true.” [BonJour, 2005, p. 100]

Other traditional problems for Radical Empiricism:

- necessity
- lack of sensitivity to empirical evidence

These are the kind of reasons that the positivists gave for rejecting Mill’s version of the view.

3 Confirmation Holism

Confirmation holism provides a response to the argument from troublesome cases.

What it is

“We must view justification in a more holistic way: beliefs, even whole theories, face the tribunal of experience not along, but in the company of auxiliary theories, background assumptions and the like...in the light of this, we have no reason to believe that whereas scientific laws, which are uncontroversially empirical, are confirmed in the holistic empirical way, the laws of logic and mathematics are not.” [Devitt, 2005]

- one important consequence of confirmation holism is that when our web of theory, auxiliary theory etc. contradicts experience, there will be more than one way to adapt it to remove the contradiction. One might reject one’s theory, or an auxiliary or a background assumption etc.

- it is an important part of the response to the troublesome cases that how we chose to revise is governed by certain principles, such as simplicity (don't make your theories more complicated than they need to be) and conservatism (make revisions to the web as minimal as possible.)
- revising some of our beliefs—especially certain basic arithmetical and logical ones—would have widespread repercussions, because they are connected to many other beliefs. We think of these as being towards the center of the web of belief.
- beliefs that are more directly justified by experience (Quine calls them 'germane' to experience) are taken to be closer to the edges of the web.
- in the metaphor of the web of belief

Why it helps

- the troublesome necessity, unrevisability and a priority of the cases above is *illusory*
- it's not that (say) $2+2+3$ could not be false, but only that it's centrality in the web of belief means that we are extremely unlikely to ever revise the web in such a way that it would be taken to be false. The rationalist has (perhaps understandably) confused the property of centrality in the web with the property of necessity.
- the lack of sensitivity to empirical evidence also a consequence of centrality in the web of belief. It is only the beliefs at the edges which are especially sensitive to experience. This is also what generates the appearance of independence from experience, and hence the appearance of a priority.

Problems for Confirmation Holism:

- it doesn't distinguish between the theory being tested and the background against which it is tested. In particular, if T is our theory, A the background assumptions against which T entails the evidence, and E is the evidence, then we have $T \wedge A \models E$. Now suppose E is observed. This confirms the entire conjunction $T \wedge A$.
- But if we look at particular cases, this seems wrong. Suppose we pull a card from an ordinary pack, but we aren't allowed to look at it. Then let T be the simple theory: *The card is a seven. The card is a heart.* Then we are told E : *The card is red.* This confirms the theory; the probability of the theory increases from $\frac{1}{52}$ to $\frac{1}{26}$. This does not, even indirectly, confirm the sentence which says that the card is a seven. That is as probable as it ever was $\frac{1}{13}$. Yet according to confirmation holism, it is the theory as a whole that gets confirmed, and that confirmation is just inherited by the parts of the theory. [Sober, 2000]
- This seems especially bad in the face of theories of confirmation which are more sensitive (such as probabilistic ones.)

4 The Argument from Propositions for which experience provides only indirect justification (BonJour)

- beliefs about the unobserved past
- beliefs about unobserved situations in the present
- beliefs about the future

- beliefs in laws of nature and similar sorts of generalisations
- beliefs about unobservable entities and processes, such as those described by theoretical science

How can experience justify belief in these propositions if it doesn't justify *directly*.

BonJour: it has to justify a belief:

(1) If D then I

where D is a conjunction of all beliefs that receive direct justification, and I is the putatively indirectly justified belief.

Now how is this conditional justified?

What sort of reason could we have for thinking that a conditional of the sort indicated is true? If all the things for which there are direct experiential reasons are already contained in the antecedent and if the consequent genuinely goes beyond the content of the antecedent ... then experience can offer no direct reason (and no indirect reason without assuming some other conditional of the same sort) for thinking that such a conditional proposition is true. [BonJour, 2005, p. 102]

5 Devitt on Premise vs. Rule Circularity

Premise Circular Argument:

All ravens are black.	
All the observed ravens are black.	
All ravens are black.	

Rule Circular Argument?

If r, then ((If p then q) and p together entail q.)	
r	
(If p then q) and p together entail q.	

- One oddity here is that as rules don't seem to be propositional, it's rather hard to know what an argument in support of one looks like; strictly speaking the rule cannot be the conclusion of the argument, so we end up using something related, such as a sentence which expresses the metalinguistic proposition that the premises of the rule entail the conclusion.
- internal vs. external conceptions of justification

6 The Obscurity of A Priori Justification

Here are most of the positive things that BonJour says to characterise a priori reasons.

"The traditional view, which I believe to be essentially correct, is that in the most basic cases such reasons result from direct or immediate insight into the truth, indeed the necessary truth, of the relevant claim."

"Though the term "intuition" has been used to refer to such insights, I will refer to them simply as "a priori insights," thus, I hope, avoiding any confusion with the other uses of the rather slippery term "intuition".

"insights of this sort are not supposed to be brute intuitions of truth, on a par with the hunches and fears that may simply strike someone in a psychologically compelling way. On the

contrary, a priori insights at least purport to reveal not just *that* the claim is or must be true, but also, at some level, *why* this is and indeed must be so.”

Devitt suggests that explanations of basic a priori justification usually turn out to make it either not justification, or not a priori.

References

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