

# A Priori Knowledge: The Conceptual Approach

## *I Introduction*

A priori knowledge is knowledge that is, in some sense that requires further specification, independent of any evidence gathered through sense experience. A priori justification is justification that is similarly independent. I shall discuss a priori knowledge in this paper. But I think a priori justification is intimately related to a priori knowledge. Indeed, I adopt the following as a working definition of a priori knowledge: *knowledge which is justificatorily independent of evidence gathered through sense experience*. That is to say, I'll take a priori knowledge to be knowledge whose justification does not consist in or ultimately rest upon<sup>1</sup> empirical evidence.

This is what is sometimes known as a 'negative' condition on a prioricity: it refers to the *lack* of justificatory reliance on empirical evidence.<sup>2</sup> Some philosophers believe that a good definition of a priori knowledge should also include either (a) a requirement of empirical indefeasibility, or (b) a positive condition such as that the knowledge in question be secured using a faculty of rational intuition or insight. I explain in section I of Jenkins 2008a why I think such extra conditions are inappropriate; briefly, both these requirements seem to me to make a priori knowledge easily and uninterestingly dismissable by those who think every belief can be defeated by good-enough testimony and that faculties of rational intuition or insight are scientifically unrespectable.

While knowledge and justification are widely accepted as the primary bearers of a prioricity, a *proposition* might also be described as a priori on the grounds that it is one which can be known and/or justified a priori. Truths of mathematics and of logic, and "definitional matters" (propositions such as *all vixens are female*), are widely considered to be leading candidates for propositions meeting these conditions.

Discuss a priori knowledge with a randomly-selected analytic philosopher these days, and you can expect one of three reactions. From certain staunch defenders of certain forms of "naturalism" (particularly "Quinean naturalism") and/or of the movement known as "experimental philosophy", you may expect distaste and suspicion of what they perceive to be an outmoded and frankly pernicious notion. From a good number of others, you'll get some degree of bafflement, ranging from a faintly-uninterested shrug to a flat-out declaration that philosophy is in a muddle over this topic and hasn't made much progress with it over the last fifty years. The remainder you can expect to find happily *using* the notion of a prioricity, without much willingness to say exactly what they're up to when they do, but lacking the second camp's sense of there being anything very confused or confusing here or any real work that needs to be done.

There are notable exceptions to this tripartite division. Philosophers who work specifically on the a priori themselves are unlikely to fall squarely into the second or third camps. Some fall into the first, but of the others, there are a decent number who believe there is work to do and serious progress is being made, and I'll be talking about some of them in this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Sensory experience may nonetheless be a *precondition* for possession the relevant justification, as discussed in the Introduction to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

<sup>2</sup> See the introduction to Casullo 2003 for a thorough discussion of positive and negative conditions for a prioricity (of justification).

However, this paper is in the first instance addressed to camp number three: those who believe in the a priori (or at least are happy to conduct their philosophical enquiries in other areas *as if* they believe in the a priori), but don't have considered opinions about what it is or how it works. I'll be trying to explain what there is to worry about when one casually signs up for the a priori, and what kinds of options are available by way of solutions to those worries.

I hope also to be providing an overview that may assuage some of the baffled in camp number two. I won't be offering much to sway anybody in camp number one, however. (The most I shall do is gesture towards what I take to be a naturalistically respectable account of how a priori knowledge is possible, which might be of interest to any who are motivated primarily by the thought that the a priori is *not* compatible with naturalistic respectability.) Nonetheless, I invite the members of the first camp to agree with Jeeves that it is as well to know exactly what tunes the devil is playing, and read my paper anyway.

As I see it, the most serious question facing those who believe in a priori knowledge is to explain *how it could possibly work*. How *can* one secure knowledge without relying on the evidence of one's senses? Maybe knowledge of one's own mind could be secured that way, but classic putative examples of a priori knowable propositions ( $2+2=4$ ) seem, *prima facie* at least, to be about something else altogether. The closest thing to an orthodoxy among believers who are trying to answer this question is that it's got something to do with concepts, conceptual truth, analyticity, or something in the vicinity of those things. According to this semi-orthodoxy, the reason we can know *all vixens are female* a priori has something to do with how our concepts *vixen* and *female* relate to one another, and/or with the fact that *all vixens are female* is an analytic and/or conceptual truth (whatever exactly that might come to). For terminological convenience, I shall use an umbrella term for all forms of the view just described. I shall refer to such views as versions of *the conceptual approach*. Due to its semi-orthodox status, the conceptual approach will be a focal point of this paper.

Appealing though this kind of (partial) answer may be, any serious defender of it must address question of exactly *how* it is supposed to help explain how we can have a priori knowledge. This kind of question is being pressed more and more in recent debates about the a priori. Until it is settled, the epistemological value of such appeals is very much in doubt.

After this introduction, in section II, I describe two different ways of categorizing what seem to me to be the most important extant accounts of a priori knowledge. The principal aim of the first is give the reader a sense of why believing in the a priori raises interesting challenges that shouldn't be swept under the carpet, and the principal aim of the second is to indicate how the conceptual approach relates to its competitors, and how its advocates differ from one another.

Then, in section III, I present what I take to be the biggest general challenge to the conceptual approach: the challenge of saying why the way things are with *our concepts* is supposed to be any sort of guide to the way *the world* is. Why, for instance, should the existence of a certain kind of relationship between our concepts of *vixen* and *female* be a source of knowledge of the (*prima facie* mind-independent, worldly) fact that all vixens are female? I outline two prominent versions of this challenge due to Bonjour and Field in section III, then briefly describe my preferred way of answering the challenge in section IV.

In section V, I discuss that answer a little further, moving beyond previously published work. I shall, in particular, address questions concerning the role of *experience* in the proposal (explaining how the proposal is essentially empiricist and not available to a rationalist) and

questions about the role of *concepts* in the account (examining whether they could comfortably be dispensed with).

## *II The State of Play*

In Jenkins 2008a, section II (and elsewhere) I describe what I call the ‘three-step pattern problem’, by way of an attempt to explain what I find so puzzling about a priori knowledge. Here (following my 2008a discussion), I shall quickly explain what that problem is, and how theories of the a priori can be categorized by the way in which they seek to address it.

The basic idea is that, when we want to understand how we have knowledge of the mind-independent world, we tend to give accounts that involve three steps:

- (1) An input step, wherein information about the world somehow *gets into* our minds,
- (2) A processing step, wherein that information is dealt with by our cognitive systems,  
and
- (3) A belief-formation step.

For example, natural understanding of visual knowledge incorporates an input step when it talks about the impact of the external world on our light-responsive visual receptors, a processing step when it talks about the processing of that input by areas of the brain (in particular, the visual cortex), and a belief-formation step when it is postulated that the upshot of such processing is a belief concerning the visible external world.

The problem with a priori knowledge is that the input step is missing. The senses play no obvious input role, and many philosophers (particularly those who would classify themselves as being of a “naturalistic” bent) are unhappy about postulating other faculties (such as a faculty of “rational intuition”) which could provide us with non-empirical input.

Thinking about the three-step pattern problem enables one to categorize classic stances on the a priori by means of the way the resolution that each attempts to provide. The first classic option is to say that no input step is required for a priori knowledge, because it (or the a priori knowable propositions) are either mind-dependent or trivial in some way that obviates the need for an input step. The second is to claim that there is a non-experiential input step, and the third is to deny that there is any a priori knowledge. (I discuss each of these paths, and some of those who walk them, in Jenkins 2008a, section II.)

Each option involves denying that the conjunction of:

- (A) there is substantive a priori knowledge of mind-independent truths, and:
- (B) there is no faculty of rational intuition.

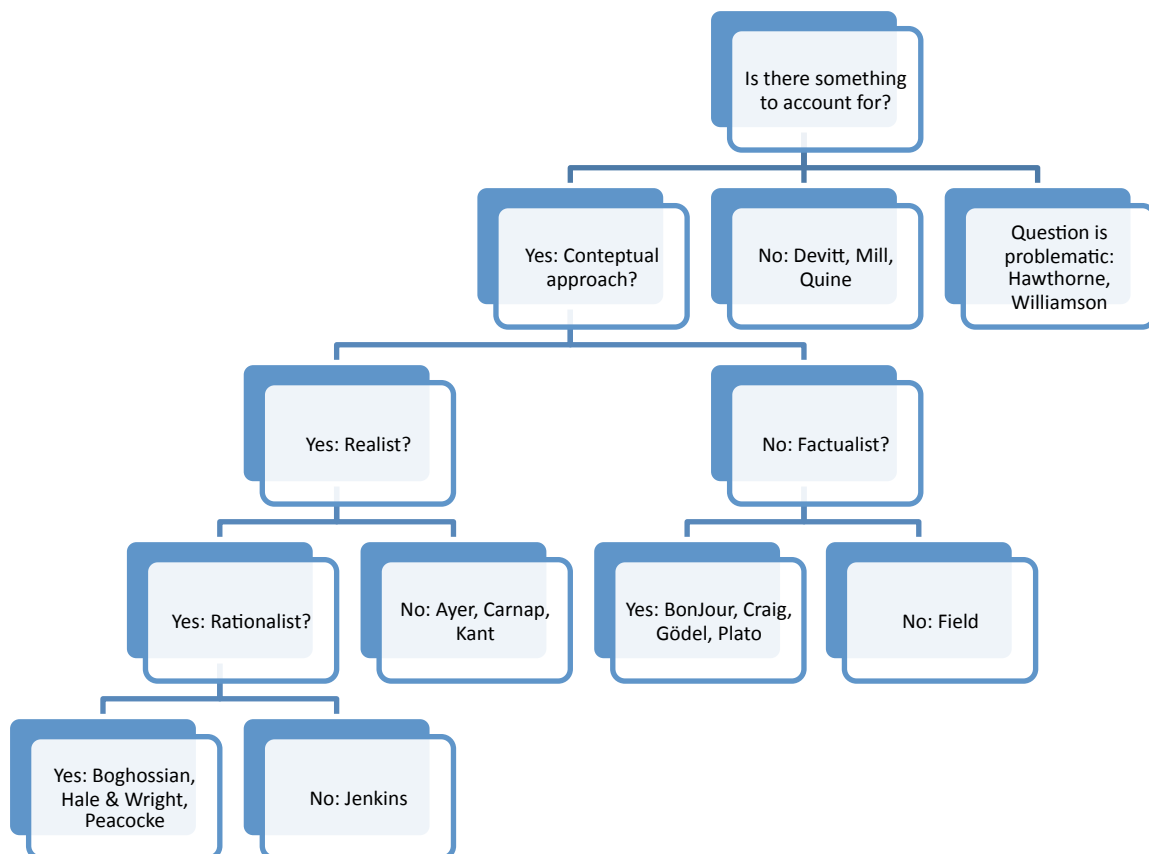
Yet each of these two claims has sufficiently widespread and substantial intuitive appeal to keep contemporary philosophers searching for better alternatives to the classic versions of the three classic options. I favour an account according to which there is an empirical input step (see Jenkins 2008b for details).

I think this categorization of views on the a priori in terms of their ways of solving the three-step pattern problem is useful for establishing that a commitment to a priori knowledge raises difficult questions and should not be undertaken lightly. Now, however, I want to describe *another* way of categorizing theories of the a priori, which is in some respects more

comprehensive, and also provides a useful way of understanding some of the most significant versions of what I'm calling the conceptual approach, and the relationship between that approach and its rivals. This new categorization is in no sense a competitor to my earlier categorization; it is offered as a complementary way of surveying the field.

Since what I am calling 'the conceptual approach' can take many forms, its proponents can (and do) offer many different answers to the key question of how exactly appealing to conceptual truth (or some related notion) is supposed to help us explain the possibility a priori knowledge. I will eventually outline my preferred version of the approach, which allows us to combine a robust mind-independence realism about the subject matter known with a naturalistically-motivated epistemological empiricism. As far as I know it is the only extant version which combines these features; other forms of the conceptual approach force us, on reflection, into either anti-realism or some kind of rationalism.) That is one reason why an unexamined commitment to a priori knowledge is problematic: the conceptual approach is (as close as we get in philosophy to) an orthodoxy, while it is rather unorthodox to be either a rationalist or an anti-realist about every (putatively) a priori knowable subject matter. There is a tension here that should not be ignored.

With this in mind, let me proceed by locating some of the key philosophical positions with regard to a priori knowledge, including versions of the conceptual approach. I shall do this by means of a series of questions, answers to which distinguish the various parties to the debate from one another. Necessarily, the descriptions of other views in this section will be sketchy; the aim is to give a broad-brush sense of the motivation for a certain version of the conceptual approach, not to do full justice to its many rivals. The flow chart below represents the state of play as described in this section diagrammatically.



First, there is the question of whether or not a priori knowledge is a distinctive epistemological phenomenon at all. Is there something interesting here that we should be trying to account for? Some might say that the question isn't clear enough to answer, or is in other ways problematic. Williamson (2007) and Hawthorne (forthcoming) each argue, in different ways, that there is something suspicious about the very notion of a prioricity. Briefly, Williamson thinks that the notion is 'too crude', and Hawthorne doubts whether there is any arbitrary way of drawing the distinction between the a priori knowledge and other knowledge. (I discuss and resist these claims in Jenkins 2008a, section 5; I won't rehash my discussion here.)

Those who answer a straightforward 'no' to the first question, that of whether there is anything interesting here that we should be trying to explain, include Mill (1843) and Quine (1951). Both of these philosophers argue, in their different ways, that what appear to be cases of a priori knowledge are in fact (extreme) cases of ordinary empirical knowledge. There are also contemporary defenders of this sort of view; Devitt (e.g. 2005) defends the Quinean version extensively.

If it is agreed that a priori knowledge *is* a distinctive phenomenon, there is the question of whether or not to adopt any version of the conceptual approach. If the answer is no, then we can ask whether or not any form of factualism is correct for claims of a priori knowledge and/or justification: that is, whether there are facts corresponding to acceptable claims of this kind, or whether the acceptability of such claims has some other basis. Field (2000 and 2006 and elsewhere) defends a form of non-factualism, at least for basic a priori justification, arguing that claims of (a priori) justification for certain very basic principles are merely expressions of pro-attitude towards these principles. Field here draws on the work of Gibbard (1990), who makes a similar proposal about all epistemically normative talk.

Factualist positions available to those who reject the conceptual approach are various. They include versions of the view that we have direct rational insight into the truth of a priori knowable propositions. Some of the thoughts of Gödel 1947 could be developed in this way: we could posit a priori knowledge of set theory, for instance, via a rational faculty which is 'something like a perception' of its objects, without our account appealing to conceptual truth. Contemporary philosophers with views occupying this node of my diagram include Bonjour 1998. There are also innatist options (including Plato's view that certain truths are learned through encounters with the Forms prior to birth: see his *Phaedo*). Then there are versions of conventionalism which are not wedded to the conceptual approach (e.g. those which run along the lines suggested in Craig 1975), and certain positions according to which a priori knowledge is possible without *any* substantive explanation because either it or the propositions known are in some sense trivial (see Jenkins 2008a, section II for discussion of how ideas from Lewis and Wittgenstein could be developed in support of such a line.)

For those who favour the conceptual approach, we now ask whether or not mind-independence realism<sup>3</sup> is true for any of the a priori knowable subject matters that are covered by the account. Those who answer 'no' here include Carnap (1950), Ayer (1936) and Kant (1781). Those who *do* want to be realists then have to decide whether to be rationalists: that is, whether to accept that some propositions about the independent world can be known in a way which is wholly justificatorily independent of input from the senses. (I take empiricism to be the denial of rationalism: the view that no such proposition can be known without justificatory reliance on the senses). Those who seem to want to answer 'yes'

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<sup>3</sup> By 'realism', I shall mean mind-independence realism as defined in Jenkins 2005.

to this question include Bealer (2000), Boghossian (e.g. 1997) and Peacocke (e.g. 2000). Hale and Wright (see e.g. 2000) also appear to fall into this category.

There is one node left on my diagram. That is the node which I want to occupy. This node represents the view that a priori knowledge is a distinctive phenomenon to be explained by some sort of conceptual approach, that we should be mind-independence realists about (at least some of) the subject matters to be covered by the account, and that rationalism is not true. In what follows I shall try to show that this is an available combination of views, and that it addresses our target question of how appealing to conceptual truth can help us explain a priori knowledge, without committing us to rationalism or anti-realism.<sup>4</sup>

### *III The Problem*

Two nice, clear presentations of the problem raised by our key question – that of how appealing to conceptual truth or related notions is supposed to help explain a priori knowledge – can be found in the work of BonJour and, more recently, Field. Chapter 2 of BonJour's 1998 discusses, in particular, *empiricist* theories of the a priori which appeal to various notions of analyticity or conceptual truth. Among the kinds of problems he identifies for such theories are:

1. inadequacies in various of the proffered characterizations of analyticity, conceptual truth and related notions,
2. inadequacies in the scope of various extant versions of the conceptual approach (i.e. apparent cases of the a priori with which they do not deal), and
3. inadequacies in the explanations (if any are offered at all) of how attributing analyticity or some similar property to a class of a priori knowable propositions is supposed to amount to giving an *account* of how these propositions can be known a priori.

I am focusing on worries of kind 3. The reason is that these worries are general in a way that worries of kinds 1 and 2 are not; skirmishing around the edges of one's theory might rescue versions of the conceptual approach from problems of kinds 1 and 2, but the lack of a good-enough answer to 3 is a serious problem for the whole approach.

As summed up by BonJour (1998, p. 37), the problem is that, even if we are inclined to believe that a priori knowable claims are analytic or conceptually true, 'exactly what light is this supposed to shed on the *way* in which such a claim is justified?' If, for example, we say that analytic truths can be known a priori because all that is needed to know them is an understanding of what they mean, we are owed 'some articulated account of *how* justification is supposed to result solely from [one's grasp of] meaning' (p. 38).

BonJour argues quite convincingly that what's missing from the versions of the conceptual approach that he considers is an explanation of *why it is epistemically respectable* to hold beliefs just because they are, or seem to be, in some way 'integral to', or 'the upshot of', or 'delivered by', our concepts.

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<sup>4</sup> This may cause readers to wonder how I can claim to be an empiricist and to believe in a priori knowledge. The viability of the combination turns on the plausibility of distinguishing between knowledge grounded in empirical *evidence*, which is what a prioricity rules out, and knowledge grounded in empirical *input*, which is what empiricism demands. I return to this point in section V.

Field (2006, p. 85) presses what I think is essentially this same challenge:

[W]hy should the fact, if it is one, that certain beliefs or inferences are integral to the meaning of a concept show that these principles are correct? Why should the fact, if it is one, that abandoning those beliefs or inferences would require a change of meaning show that we shouldn't abandon those beliefs or inferences? Maybe the meaning we've attached to these terms is a bad one that is irremediably bound up with error, and truth can only be achieved by abandoning those meanings in favor of different ones (that resemble them in key respects but avoid the irremediable error).

What is to be said in response?

A certain kind of anti-realist could address the challenge by claiming that there *is no way* for meanings or concepts to be 'bad' ones that are 'irremediably bound up with error'. For that to be so, the facts we come to know by thinking about our concepts would have to be such that those concepts could fail to be decent epistemic guides to it. But, according to the envisaged anti-realist response, the facts we come to know are merely facts *about* our concepts, or at least facts that are determined by how things stand with our concepts. Hence our concepts are *bound* to be decent guides to it.

Rationalists might try to answer that something non-empirical ensures that our concepts are tied to reality in such a way as to be trustworthy guides to how that reality is, rather than 'bad' ones. A serious attempt at a rationalist move of this kind is made by Peacocke (e.g. 2000), who argues in effect that we can trust our concepts as epistemic guides to the world because they are, *by their very natures*, accurate guides. According to Peacocke, for instance, the possession conditions for our concept of conjunction closely reflect the individuation conditions of the conjunction itself. Thus, he claims, possessing the concept *and* puts one in a strong position with respect to knowledge of facts like  $A \& B \models A$ . Trusting our concepts is a very reliable method of learning the truth. For myself, I fear that for all Peacocke has said, this sort of reliability may not be knowledge-conducive, but rather analogous to the reliability of blindly trusting whatever is written on the subway wall, which luckily for you happens to be a logical truth (see Jenkins 2008b, section 2.5).

One less appealing rationalist answer (not, as far as know, defended by any contemporary philosopher) is that our concepts are linked to the way reality via some non-sensory mechanism of which we have as yet no scientific understanding.

I myself do not find anti-realist or rationalist answers to Field's question appealing. But my aim here has been to indicate that it is fairly clear that answers (of sorts) to that question *are available* if we are prepared to be anti-realists or rationalists. By contrast, it is far from clear what sort of answer, if any, a realist empiricist who favours the conceptual approach might give.

The BonJour/Field challenge is related to the three-step pattern problem insofar as one respectable way to address both challenges is by arguing for an input step (whether empirical or not), and another is to show that no input step is required in order for concepts to be trustworthy guides to the world. The BonJour/Field challenge is different insofar as it is specific to the conceptual approach, and does not (at least, for all that's been said) need to be addressed by talking about worldly input into the relevant processes of thought.

However, I think my preferred empiricist solution to the three-step pattern problem is also the best response to the BonJour/Field challenge. In the following section, I shall set up the account specifically as a response to that challenge.

#### *IV A Solution*

I shall be assuming, in describing my version of the conceptual approach, that concepts are sub-propositional mental representations.<sup>5</sup> I shall also assume that we can learn by introspecting at least some of the features of our concepts, and in particular that we can learn how they relate to certain other concepts. For instance, we can learn by introspecting how our concept of *vixen* is related to our concept of *female* (more on the nature of this relationship later). Furthermore, I assume that such conceptual examination is a process which can result in the adoption of certain beliefs, such as the belief that all vixens are female.

I suggest that there are certain conditions on concepts, such that concepts which meet these conditions can and should be trusted as epistemic guides to how the world is. That is to say, I suggest that we will sometimes be able to obtain epistemic grounds sufficient for knowledge through mere conceptual examination, provided the concepts under examination meet the required conditions. The conditions on concepts which I shall discuss are:

1. an accuracy condition: the concepts must be accurate guides to the world, and
2. a non-accidentalness condition: the obtaining of 1 must be non-accidental (in a sense analogous to the sense in which knowledge must be non-accidentally true belief).

Concepts which meet those conditions can and should be treated as knowledge-conducive guides to the mind-independent world.<sup>6</sup> We can and should accept the deliverances of an examination of *good* concepts.

The first condition on goodness for concepts is that the concepts in question (or at least the constituent concepts out of which they are built) must *accurately* represent real features of the world, at least in the respects about which we are deriving information from them when we conduct our conceptual examination.<sup>7</sup> Accurate concepts are ones which either stand for something which is really there, or else are built out of concepts which stand for something which is really there.<sup>8</sup> The second condition is that the obtaining of the accuracy condition

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<sup>5</sup> For other notions of ‘concept’ (such as the view that concepts are bundles of abilities), and their possible relations to a view like the one under development in this paper, see Jenkins 2008b, p. 260.

<sup>6</sup> The idea that our concepts encode information about the *actual* world does not by itself explain how we can secure knowledge of how things *necessarily* are through conceptual examination. In further work (Jenkins forthcoming) I argue that such modal knowledge is possible because the structure of the actual world is sufficient as an epistemic guide to the modal facts.

<sup>7</sup> Note that this may mean that which concepts count as ‘good’ depends on which conceptual truths we are interested in justifying at the time we are attributing the ‘goodness’.

<sup>8</sup> I am inclined to count uninstantiated properties – even necessarily uninstantiated ones – among the things which are ‘really there’. However, many concepts of uninstantiated properties could be counted as accurate by someone who disagreed on this point. For instance, such a person might say that the concept *round square* counts as accurate by virtue of being composed of the instantiated concepts *round* and *square*. Similarly, gruesome concepts might be allowed to count as accurate without out admitting that there is a genuine property

must be non-accidental, in a sense analogous to the sense in which knowledge must be non-accidentally true belief. (See Jenkins 2008b, pp. 59-61 for more on this.)

As I am an empiricist, I believe that the way to account for the holding of the relevant accuracy and non-accidentalness conditions is by thinking about how our concepts are epistemologically related to the input we get from the world via our sensory apparatus. I think knowledge through concept examination is possible because, due to our sensory contact with the world, our concepts come to encode trustworthy information about that world, and we can recover this information by examining those concepts.

The idea, then, is that there is an input step into the process of obtaining knowledge through conceptual examination. This input step consists in the impact which sensory contact with the world has upon our concepts. It is what I have elsewhere called the (empirical) *grounding* of the relevant concepts (Jenkins 2008b, chapter 4). As on all versions of the conceptual approach, on the envisaged account there is then a mental processing step, which consists in some kind of examination of our concepts. But now, this examination is not *merely* an examination of ourselves, but rather a way of recovering the information about the world which our concepts have come to encode owing to their sensitivity to sensory input.

Taking a toy example, and speaking rather roughly for the moment, I claim that we can, in some cases, secure a priori knowledge of the proposition *All vixens are female* by noticing that our concept of vixenhood is as of<sup>9</sup> a property that includes<sup>10</sup> the property represented by our concept of femaleness, provided that:

(i) the concepts involved are accurate, in the sense that there are real properties in the world, vixenhood and femaleness, represented by our concepts thereof, and these properties are indeed related in the way suggested by the conceptual examination, and:

(ii) the obtaining of (i) is due to the fact that, in forming or selecting those concepts, we were sensitive to our sensory input, and this input guided us to concepts which accurately represent their referents as being related in the way described in (i).

As it stands this is the merest outline. Many different elucidations are possible, and I take this to be one of the appealing features of the research programme which the proposal opens up. But a little more detail on the bare bones given so far will probably help the reader to see what kind of thing I'm after.

Let me first talk a bit about the *accuracy* condition. One might assume at first that this should be the condition that the concepts must be fully accurate representations of real

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of being grue.

<sup>9</sup> This 'as of' terminology is lifted from the philosophy of perception. I think it is useful here for reasons similar to those which motivate its use in its original context. A concept may be *as of* a property which includes the property of femaleness - i.e. may be such that a correctly-conducted examination of that concept leads us, in the absence of countervailing reasons, to believe that it is of a property which includes the property of femaleness - without its actually being *of* such a property. The concept may fail to be of such a property either by failing to have a referent at all, or by referring to a property which does not in fact include the property of femaleness.

<sup>10</sup> This talk of property 'inclusion' may or may not be best understood as metaphorical. What I require is that there is some substantive metaphysical relation between the properties, the obtaining of which is not the same thing as - though it metaphysically underwrites - the fact that (necessarily) all vixens are female.

features of the world<sup>11</sup> which are their referents. But in fact what is required is in some ways less and in some ways more than that. It is *less* in two respects. Firstly, I think it is enough if concepts *either* refer themselves *or* are ultimately composed of referring concepts (see Jenkins 2008b, section 4.4). How important this point is will depend on how abundant an ontology one wants to admit.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, some *misrepresentation* of a concept's referent may be permissible, provided that this does not bear on the accuracy of information being recovered from the concept. So for instance, some versions of the view might have it that a set of geometrical concepts which include some inaccuracy - e.g. that would lead us to conclude that all triangles have angles which add up to 180° - can still be safely used as guides to other facts about the world - e.g. the fact that all triangles are plane figures with three sides.

What is required is *more* than fully accurate representation of real features of the world in that the way our concepts *relate* to each other must reflect the way that correlating features of the world are related. This was brought out by the vixen example: it is not enough, for the accuracy condition to be met in this case, that our concept *vixen* picks out vixenhood and accurately represents that property, and our concept *female* picks out femaleness and accurately represents that property. The conclusion drawn in this case, that all vixens are female, is driven by the fact that the two concepts are related in a certain way, i.e. that the fact the concept *vixen* is a concept as of a property which includes the property represented by our concept *female*. The accuracy condition in this case will therefore also require that the properties represented by these concepts are indeed so related.

Let me now turn to the non-accidentalness condition. In my opinion, the mere accuracy of concepts does not suffice for it to be possible to obtain knowledge by examining them. We might get true beliefs that way, but for knowledge, we need more. Compare: the mere accuracy of Guru's assertions doesn't mean that Gullible can come to know things by listening to Guru. If Gullible has no reason whatever to trust Guru, but does so anyway, then the mere fact that what Guru says is true does not mean that Gullible ends up knowing it. Gullible might get true beliefs that way, but for knowledge, more is needed.<sup>13</sup>

Exactly what more is needed is a matter of debate, and has been since at least Plato's *Meno*. But many – plausibly, all – of the promising stories on offer amount to ways of cashing out the idea that knowledge is *non-accidentally* true belief, in some rather specialized sense of 'accidental'.<sup>14</sup> If knowledge is indeed non-accidentally true belief, then if our concepts are to

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<sup>11</sup> Which could be properties, objects, or any other kind of thing that exists in the world.

<sup>12</sup> See footnote 8 above. Unfortunately, I doubt whether the view under discussion will appeal to those who want an ontology *so* sparse that the only concepts which stand for real objects and properties are concepts of microphysical objects and properties. For it isn't very plausible that our concepts of macrophysical objects and properties are composed of concepts of microphysical objects and properties. So most of our concepts will turn out to be inaccurate on such a view, and yet I doubt whether its advocates will accept what I would take to be a consequence of this: that we cannot know that all tables are artefacts by examining our concepts *table* and *artefact*.

<sup>13</sup> If reliabilists are forced to deny this (which the subtler ones are not), so much the worse for reliabilism.

<sup>14</sup> Not every kind of accident destroys knowledge; Nozick's glimpse case (1981, p. 193) establishes that. Exactly which kinds of accident destroy knowledge depends on what the requirements on knowledge are. But various accounts of what the requirements are can be transformed into corresponding accounts of the requirements on good concepts; see Jenkins 2008b, pp. 130-1 for some examples.

count as a source of knowledge, they must be non-accidentally accurate. If they are not, the beliefs we arrive at by examining them will be at best accidentally true.

I believe that our best shot at explaining why our concepts are non-accidentally accurate will have to involve some appeal to the part experience plays in determining which concepts we have and what they are like.<sup>15</sup> There are (at least) two possible avenues to explore here; one is that we acquire concepts in response to sensory input, another is that we have (some of) our concepts innately, and experience determines which ones we keep. (I discuss these options a little in Jenkins 2008b, section 4.5.)

I submit that any knowledge we obtain through the examination of concepts whose pedigree is in this sense empirical will count as empirical knowledge. The mechanisms we are using to secure knowledge of the world, on this type of account, are not purely rational mechanisms like introspection and reflection. It is through the functioning of the senses that our concepts come to encode the information which introspection and reflection enable us to recover. So the senses play a key role in the knowledge-acquisition process, considered in its entirety. Sensory input is not just a precondition of knowledge, but actually *supplies the justification*.

On this view, therefore, to say that knowledge obtained through conceptual examination is non-empirical knowledge is rather like saying that knowledge obtained by observing that p and deducing from p that q is non-empirical knowledge because the *second* step doesn't involve the use of the senses. As with all knowledge of mind-independent subject matters, knowledge obtained through conceptual examination requires an input step, and the input step is empirical.

The accuracy condition and the non-accidentalness condition are conditions which concepts must meet if their examination is to be a way for their possessor to secure a priori knowledge. It is not a further condition that the subject should *know* or *believe* or *have reason to believe* that her concepts are non-accidentally accurate. The proposal is to that extent epistemologically *externalist* in outlook. (For the precise notion of externalism employed here, and discussion, please see Jenkins 2008b, section 2.2.)

The Bonjour version of the challenge which motivates this section is that extant empiricist versions of the conceptual approach fail to make clear *how* the status of certain propositions as conceptual truths explains their a priori justification and/or knowability. The proposal outlined above makes an account of this phenomenon available. Our concepts, because of their sensitivity to experience, have come to encode certain pieces of information about the world. The conceptual truths *are* those pieces of information. That is why those particular truths can be justified and known purely through examination of our conceptual maps.

The Field version of the challenge asks why intimate connections between certain beliefs and certain concepts should be taken to show that those beliefs are true, and raises the concern that our concepts (or, as he puts it in this part of the challenge, the 'meanings of our terms') may be 'bad' ones that are 'irremediably bound up with error'. The answer in view is that beliefs that bear the relevant relationship to our concepts are likely to be true because the concepts in question are likely to be non-accidentally accurate (as opposed to 'bad'), which in turn is due to the sensitivity of those concepts to experience.

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that 'experience' here does not mean conceptualized experience; what I'm talking about is the impact of the world upon the brain via the normal functioning of our sensory apparatus.

## V Concluding Remarks

Is the account described in section IV an account of *a priori* knowledge, properly so called? Obviously, if we define a priori knowledge as knowledge which is non-empirical, i.e. justificatorily independent of *all* sense experience, then it is not. But if all that is required for a prioricity is justificatory independence of empirical *evidence* (as many definitions suggest) then it might well be. For the process of securing empirically grounded concepts then recovering information through conceptual examination is sufficiently unlike the process of ordinary empirical evidence-gathering for it to make sense for us to decide not to count it as a form of evidence-gathering.

What we definitely have is an approach which respects the fact that knowledge secured through conceptual examination is independent of all the *familiar* kinds of empirical justification – the fact, that is, that we don't have to do any scientific tests, or look out the window, or check anything other than our concepts, in order to secure this knowledge, and that it could only be undermined if it turned out there was something wrong with our concepts or we had made a mistake in our examination of them. That is why this form of empiricism is significantly different from Mill's or Quine's.

And in fact, it doesn't matter much if we decide that the best use of the terms is one whereby empirical concept grounding counts as empirical evidence-gathering and that therefore my account does not rescue a priori knowledge properly so-called. What is important is that it preserves the idea that the subject matters which have been *called* a priori do indeed have a special epistemological status: they are knowable in a special way, involving conceptual examination, which most things aren't. It is much less important whether we continue to describe that status as 'a prioricity'. (See Jenkins 2008b, section 9.5 for more on this issue.)

Is it open to a rationalist, especially a rationalist of Peacocke's stripe, to adopt a version of the account proposed in section IV? After all, although Peacocke did not impose *non-accidental* accuracy conditions on the concepts we use to secure a priori knowledge (see p. 7 above), he surely *could* have done so. And rationalists in general need not be hostile to the idea that sensory input shapes or filters our concepts, and that this process is important in enabling us to get a priori knowledge. They deny, of course, that such sensory input is used as *evidence* for the propositions so known, *but so do I*.

What really distinguishes me from a rationalist is that I am willing to count this role that experience plays in securing good concepts as meaning that experience *gives us our justification* for the propositions we know a priori. Although experience is not supplying evidence, it is still supplying justification. Rationalists can allow that experience plays a similar sort of role, but they cannot agree that experience, in playing that role, is *giving us our justification* for the propositions known a priori. To agree to that would be to abandon their rationalism, which says that some propositions about the independent world can be known in a way which is wholly justificatorily independent of input from the senses.<sup>16</sup>

As for Peacocke, it is true that he could have introduced further conditions on the concepts we use to secure a priori knowledge to ensure non-accidental accuracy, rather than merely accuracy. The key question is: what mechanisms could he have appealed to in explaining

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<sup>16</sup> To be more precise, a rationalist could accept the account of section IV in its entirety as a story about *some* a priori knowledge without abandoning her rationalism provided she also believed in *other* kinds of a priori knowledge which the account of section IV is not cover. What the rationalist cannot do is accept that the account of section IV is the correct account of *all* a priori knowledge.

how we end up with non-accidentally accurate concepts. The account described in section IV reaches for sensory input to play this explanatory role: the senses put our concepts in touch with the world, so that it is no accident those concepts end up accurate. But what could Peacocke reach for?

Suppose he too reaches for sensory input. Then he faces the question of why he is not willing to count that input as part of the justification for the a priori knowledge arrived at. (He cannot count it as such, on pain of no longer being a rationalist.) There are certainly things one could say here. Epistemological internalists, for instance, might be unhappy about regarding the sensory input which is responsible for our having good concepts as part of our justification for any proposition because it is not accessible in the right way to the subject. I myself take an externalist approach. But what I'm trying to do here is clarify the lie of the land, and to that end it is important to note that there are close internalist cousins of the proposal of section IV which *could* fairly be described as 'rationalist'.

That said, I do not think that any extant rationalist *has* defended such a proposal. Certain aspects of Peacocke's views are compatible with one, but neither he nor (to my knowledge) any other rationalist has so far taken on the task of making clear how it comes about that our concepts are non-accidentally accurate.

Instead of reaching for sensory input to explain how our concepts are hooked up to the world and hence why it is no accident that they are accurate, Peacocke might reach for some other, non-sensory, mechanism. But this raises the spectre of a 'faculty of rational intuition', which haunts rationalisms of a more traditional kind than Peacocke's. It is an option that could be developed by an unrepentantly traditional rationalist, though I doubt whether it would appeal to Peacocke, who describes himself as a 'moderate' rationalist precisely because he eschews related elements of traditional rationalism (see e.g. Peacocke 2000, p. 261-2).

The role of concepts in the account described in section IV is also worth commenting on. According to that account, we acquire a priori knowledge through examination of concepts which are non-accidentally accurate representations of the world. The concepts are useful insofar as they accurately represent reality. So one might wonder whether it is possible to cut out the middleman: why examine concepts which accurately represent reality, when you could be examining reality itself? Instead of saying we examine our concepts of (say) *vixen* and *female*, we could say we acquire a priori knowledge by examining the properties of vixenhood and femaleness.

In a sense, it is my view that examining accurate concepts can *amount* to an examination of reality itself, in the same way that one can examine Scotland by examining a map of it. However, to say merely that would be to miss the point of the question, which is a question about why the proposal needs to involve concepts in the first place. I'm attempting to defend a version of the conceptual approach, so I ought to say something about *why*.

The principal reason for involving concepts is that a priori knowledge seems to be available in the armchair, using only the resources available to one through methods like reflection, introspection and careful reasoning. The appeal to concepts is supposed to help explain in how, in what sense, and to what extent a priori knowledge is available in the armchair. Concepts are our mental representations – they are things in our minds – and for that reason can be, at least to some degree, examined and learned about in the armchair. It may be that we have to gather all kinds of sensory input in order for those concepts to be reliable as guides to the world, and *that* may not be possible from the armchair, but once the input is in,

we carry our concepts around with us like a map of the world, and they are available for examination wherever and wherever.

By contrast, a more direct examination of the things that our concepts are concepts of will not always be possible in the armchair. For instance, I can examine my concept of my brother Nick from the armchair, but unless Nick happens to be in the room with me I can't examine *him* from the armchair. (At least, not directly. I can examine my memories of him, but whatever's going on when we have a priori knowledge seems to be different from any straightforward kind of remembering.)

It might be replied that although I cannot examine Nick directly in any empirical way I can *think* about him and hence learn things about him (e.g. that Nick is self-identical). Indeed, it could well be argued that most people, when they acquire a priori knowledge of (say)  $7+5=12$ , are thinking about the numbers and arithmetical relations involved, not about their concepts of those numbers and relations. However, on the view I'm defending, 'conceptual examination' can be understood in a fairly lightweight sense, so that it is not in tension with this sort of claim. We can allow that one of the ways – perhaps the most common way – to do 'conceptual examination' is not to sit down explicitly to consider one's concepts as such, but merely to think about certain subject matters in a way that is *guided* by the structure of the relevant concepts. So when a child sets out to think hard about whether  $7+5$  is indeed 12, although he does not think of himself as examining his concepts, he is doing so in the relaxed sense that his thoughts are being guided largely or entirely by the nature of the relationships between his concepts of 7, +, 5, = and 12. This kind of unreflective sensitivity to the structure of his conceptual scheme is enough to enable him to recover the information that has been encoded in his concepts through sensory input.

It is an option to deny that concepts playing any significant role here, and propose some other explanation of how the right kind of examination of numbers, people, vixenhood and so on is possible from the armchair. One reason for being especially interested in a conceptualist view is that it has been so deep-seated a conviction of so many philosophers for so long that concepts and conceptual truth have something crucial to do with a priori knowledge. Another, presumably related to the first, is that it is hard to see what else could be proposed instead. Again, however, with an eye to the lie of the land, it is worth noting that there could be a cousin of my conceptualist proposal which retains some of the key features but is not properly described as a version of the conceptual approach, though I don't know of anyone's having defended such a view to date.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> I am indebted to Daniel Nolan and J.R.G. Williams for comments and discussions which have considerably improved this paper.

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