

Devitt's Naturalism and the A Priori¹

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1. Introduction: The Shape of the Attack

This paper consists in an attempt to deflect attacks on the a priori due to Michael Devitt in his recent articles 'There is No A Priori' and 'No Place for the A Priori' (2005a and forthcoming respectively). These articles develop themes and ideas from Devitt's earlier work (see e.g. Devitt 1996, 1998 and 2002), but I shall concentrate on these recent formulations. It seems to me important to respond to these attacks; the assumption that naturalism and the a priori are at best uneasy bedfellows is a rather widespread one, no doubt due in substantial part to Devitt's efforts, and it is one that I (often) suspect of being mistaken. Attempts to respond to Devitt's arguments due to Bonjour (2005b) and Rey (1998) don't strike me as getting to the heart of the matter, as we shall see during the course of this paper.

Devitt's attacks are motivated by his naturalism. Familiarly, the term 'naturalism' is used in rather different ways by different philosophers. Devitt sometimes uses the term to refer to the view that 'epistemology is part of science' (Devitt forthcoming, p. 1, fn. 1). On other occasions he uses it to refer to the view that 'all knowledge is [justified by experience]; there is only one way of knowing' (2005a, p. 105). I assume he considers these two doctrines to be very closely related (though I am not convinced that they should be so conceived).

To begin with, let me provide a bit of background and then sketch the outlines of Devitt's attack. A prioricity, for Devitt, appears to be bound up with issues of both justification and revisability. What he writes often suggests (though he does not explicitly state this in the papers under discussion) that he thinks a priori justified beliefs are not justified by experience and neither can they be (rationally) revised in the light of experience. Personally, I would prefer to think of a priori justification as centrally concerned with the justificatory point alone; the issue of empirical revisability is, in my opinion, something of a distraction (see AUTHOR). But this difference won't be of much importance in the current paper (and I will flag it when it is relevant). I also, for current purposes, want to set aside issues concerning the differences between a priori *knowledge* and a priori *justification*. For the duration of this paper I will follow Devitt in moving freely between the two, and I shall assume that a priori knowledge is knowledge for which one possesses a priori justification.

The attack Devitt wants to press has two parts. Firstly, there is an argument which attempts to undermine (what Devitt thinks is) the motivation for believing in the a priori. The motivation in question stems from the thought that there is some knowledge – e.g. of mathematics and logic² – which

¹ ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS REMOVED.

² I do not doubt that there are philosophically important differences between these two kinds of knowledge, and between them and other kinds of putatively a priori knowledge. Nevertheless, I shall follow Devitt in taking

seemingly cannot be justified by experience, nor revised in the light thereof, and hence must be a priori. Devitt thinks this motivation can be removed by showing that there is an alternative, naturalistically respectable, story to be told about how we come to have our apparently a priori knowledge through experience.

Secondly, Devitt argues that not only is there no positive reason to believe in the a priori, but the a priori is also deeply mysterious and obscure, and this is a reason to *disbelieve* that there is any a priori knowledge or justification.

With regard to the apparently a priori parts of our knowledge of mathematics, logic and so on, Devitt thinks that between them his two arguments establish that 'the *best* explanation of that knowledge is that it is empirical' (2005a, p. 106). The second argument is meant to show that a priorist explanations are bad, and the first is meant to show that we have a perfectly good empirical explanation.

In this paper I shall resist each part of Devitt's attack, and the way in which he attempts to combine them. I shall draw upon some of my own views about the a priori, primarily in defending against Devitt's second argument, but my aim is to do that in a way that undermines Devitt's argument regardless of whether or not one accepts that my views are correct. (I also briefly draw upon my own views in one of my responses to Devitt's first argument, in a way that requires more commitment; but this use is merely illustrative of a general point that could be made with reference to another account should the reader prefer.)

2. Devitt's First Argument

Devitt's preferred account of how we come to have apparently a priori knowledge, such as (parts of) our knowledge of mathematics and logic, is in essence a Quinean account, inspired by e.g. Quine 1951 and 1969. Devitt stresses the importance of thinking about justification holistically; he urges us to think of experience as confirming beliefs not one by one, but rather as confirming whole theories or world-views *en masse*. Among the beliefs that get so justified, on the Quinean picture, are our mathematical and logical beliefs. Their justification is therefore no different in kind from that which accrues by the same means to more obviously empirical beliefs, such as beliefs concerning the laws of nature or the location of objects in the physical world.

The existence of such an account of our knowledge of logic, mathematics and so on is the basis for Devitt's claim that there is no positive motivation for believing in the a priori. We don't need to believe that there is any a priori knowledge, because we already have a good story to tell about how the apparently a priori knowledge was in fact acquired empirically. We already believe in empirical ways of

mathematics and logic as paradigms of the putatively a priori knowable, and in assuming that any other putatively a priori knowable subject matters will be like them in all relevant respects. I don't think any issues that are important for the current debate are unduly neglected in so doing.

knowing, so adopting this approach is efficient and requires no additional epistemological commitments of us.

In so saying, Devitt is concerned to address the objection that there is some counterintuitiveness to the rejection of the a priori. He argues that the intuitions which originally led us to think that knowledge of mathematics and logic must be a priori are in fact merely intuitions ‘that this knowledge is not justified in some *direct* empirical way’ (2005a, p. 107). He continues: ‘Those intuitions are preserved. Yet we can still see the knowledge as empirical: it is justified in an *indirect* holistic way’.

There is certainly scope for scepticism here as to whether this is enough to ‘preserve’ the intuitions in question. One could resist if one thought that his claim that they are merely intuitions of lack of *direct* empirical justification was mistaken. After all, he does not offer an argument to the effect that this is what they really are; he merely states this. But this is not something I want to pursue here. I’m prepared grant to Devitt for the sake of argument that enough has been done to *respect* the intuitions Devitt describes, where respecting them may amount to explaining them away.

BonJour (2005b) has responded to Devitt’s first argument (that there is no need for the a priori because all knowledge can be accounted for empirically) by criticizing the empiricist proposal to which Devitt appeals. One of BonJour’s main charges against the Quinean account of knowledge of mathematics and logic is that it is problematically circular. He thinks that ‘it is circular to appeal to the very set of holistic rules whose correctness is at issue in establishing that correctness’ (p. 116), and that Devitt must make such an appeal in order to give a justification for the holistic methodology he endorses. BonJour also apparently thinks that unless he can give such a justification of his methodology, Devitt has no justification for anything he comes to believe by employing the rules in question.

I do not intend to criticize Devitt (or indeed Quine) along these lines. I am inclined to think that BonJour’s argument here (which is very similar to arguments found in his 1998) derives from an unhealthy degree of internalism. ‘Internalism’ and ‘externalism’ bear multiple epistemological meanings, but here I intend by my use of these terms to capture the distinction between those (internalists) who think that, in order to be justified in having some belief or using some rule, a subject must have accessible to her (and must hence be able to produce on demand) some justification for that belief or rule, and those (externalists) who deny this. Externalists will allow that a subject may be justified in using a rule despite not being able to give any (non-circular) justification of it, and can therefore resist BonJour’s claim that being able to provide a (non-circular) justification for the Quinean methodology is a necessary condition for securing justified beliefs by employing that methodology.³ Devitt (2005b) is, if I understand him correctly, broadly in agreement with me on this. He writes (2005b, p. 120):

³ I discuss these issues in more depth in AUTHOR.

For an inference to justify a person's conclusion it simply has to *be* good. In an epistemological moment the person may indeed have the insight that the inference *is* good. Still, the justification of her conclusion does not depend on her having this insight.

Rey (1998) is also critical of Devitt's first argument, arguing that Quine's holism is too vague and obscure to undermine the motivation for belief in the a priori. Rey suggests that for all we know, when properly developed, the Quinean picture might *accommodate* a priori knowledge; such knowledge might sometimes be the upshot of respecting theoretical virtues such as simplicity and generality (whatever they turn out to be), of which Quine approves (see p. 31). This, again, is not the kind of criticism of Devitt that I wish to press. I take Quine's account to be clear enough for the purpose to which Devitt wants to put it, and I think it is clear that on that account there is no a priori knowledge. The kind of 'obscurity' of which traditional accounts of the a priori can be fairly accused is, I think, better described as a failure to be philosophically promising, *qua* explanations of how we have the knowledge in question. Quine's holism, for all its vagueness, does not share that failing in my opinion.⁴

Where I do want to criticize Devitt is in his larger-scale ambitions for the claim that an account of mathematical and logical knowledge can be given in Quinean terms. I am happy to grant him that such an account can be described sufficiently coherently and in enough detail for it to start to sound philosophically promising. The question is: how is this supposed to undermine the motivation for believing in the a priori? To address this question, we need to know what kind of motivation for believing in the a priori there is. I am not at all convinced that Devitt is correct on this point. Firstly, the motivation he describes is not one of which I feel the force, and secondly (and more importantly), there are plausibly other sources of motivation which Devitt does not consider.

The putative motivation for believing in the a priori that interests Devitt is expressed as follows (Devitt forthcoming, p. 1):

There are many examples, drawn from mathematics, logic and philosophy, of knowledge that does not seem to be empirical. It does not seem possible that this knowledge could be justified or revised "by experience." It *must* be justified in some other way, justified a priori.

Later on the same page, this is described as '*the* motivation for the a priori' (my emphasis).

Is it really true that it does not seem *possible* that knowledge of mathematics could be justified or revised through experience? This is somewhat hard to answer without being entirely sure what kind of modality is intended here. Is it epistemic? Alethic? If alethic, how strong an alethic modality is it? I shall consider three readings:

⁴ Rey (1998) also has a positive suggestion to make about how reliabilists can be both naturalists and a priorists. This, if successful, could go some way to undermining Devitt's *second* argument, which has as its premise the claim that the a priori is deeply obscure. But as I am not a reliabilist, I think we need to do more to show that there are promising ways of understanding a priori knowledge which Devitt's argument does not acknowledge.

- (a) A strong alethic reading: it seems metaphysically impossible that the relevant knowledge is justified by (or revisable in the light of) experience.
- (b) A weaker alethic reading: it seems that there are no *close* possible worlds where the relevant knowledge is justified by (or revisable in the light of) experience.
- (c) An epistemic reading: it seems *certain* that the relevant knowledge is not justified by (or revisable in the light of) experience.

I expect that something like (c) is what Devitt intends. (b) and especially (a) strike me as implausible motivations to attribute to a priorists. However, as I shall explain below, I do not think that Devitt's attempt to undermine this motivation can work unless we read the modality as alethic. And it plausibly only really works if we read it as the strong alethic modality employed in (a). So I am a little unsure as to what exactly he is taking "the" motivation for believing in the a priori to be.

Let me note in passing that I take it that Devitt means to argue here, not that it seems as if *no* knowledge of (say) mathematics is empirically justified or revisable, but that it seems as if *some* knowledge of mathematics is such that *it* can't plausibly be thought of as empirically justifiable or revisable. Clearly, any mathematical knowledge obtained solely through testimony alone is justified through experience,⁵ and (very plausibly) can be appropriately revised in the light of further experience (such as experience of the withdrawal of the testimony in question). I should also note that I am not convinced that building an appearance of unrevisability into the motivation for the a priori, as Devitt does, is appropriate. I find myself much more susceptible to appearances of non-empirical justification than to appearances of empirical unrevisability. But I won't dwell on this point. I'll work with a notion of 'independence' of experience, where such independence may or may not involve empirical unrevisability.

There are many interesting metaphilosophical questions concerning the relevance of intuitions of the kind under discussion here to philosophical theorizing. (I am assuming, with Devitt and Bonjour, that we are dealing here with a kind of seeming that can be reasonably described as an 'intuition'.) It would be inappropriate to go into these questions in detail here; I shall merely mention a couple of relevant points about how I see things, which, I infer from Devitt's discussion in the papers under discussion here and his 2006, should be acceptable to him as well. I take intuitions such as these to provide motivation for philosophical views that respect them, and to present problems for philosophical views which force one to deny them. I take such motivations to be defeasible in various ways (intuitions can be explained away, outweighed by other considerations, and so on), but motivations nonetheless.

I am certainly sympathetic to the thought that some pieces of mathematical and logical knowledge *seem distinctive* with respect to their epistemological underpinnings, in that they seem to enjoy some kind of independence from experience. But I am not at all sure whether any modal claim along the lines of (a)-(c) is a good way to capture the appearance in question. It appears to me that certain pieces of logical and mathematical knowledge, for example, are distinctively independent of experience. But it does not

⁵ Of course, nothing is so clear that no philosopher will deny it; see e.g. Burge 1998. Thanks to NAME REMOVED for reminding me of this.

appear to me that they *must* be, in any of the three senses spelled out in (a)-(c). I do not wish to deny that there are worlds – even close ones – where those pieces of knowledge gain their epistemic grounding in a different, empirical, way.⁶ Nor does it seem especially *certain* that these pieces of knowledge are distinctive.⁷

It is particularly surprising that Devitt should employ a modal formulation of the intuition in his 2005, since BonJour, in the paper with which Devitt 2005 engages (BonJour 2005a), gives an argument for the existence of the a priori which is premised on the claim that ‘there seem to be many, many examples’ of propositions which there are a priori reasons to believe (pp. 100-1). This non-modal seeming (described by BonJour as an ‘intuitive impression’, p. 101) strikes me as a more appropriate target for Devitt’s attention.

I am happy to acknowledge the force of that the following very weak alethic modal seeming: it seems that *holding fixed the kind of knowledge they are*, some distinctive pieces of logical and mathematical knowledge could not fail to be distinctively independent of experience. But its seeming so is an uninteresting consequence of its seeming that these pieces of knowledge are of a kind distinctively independent of experience.

Is there any reason why I should accept the modal formulation Devitt offers as a reasonable substitute for my non-modal motivation for believing in the a priori? I cannot at present think of any. On the contrary, one thing that makes me *dubious* as to the acceptability of such a substitution is its presence may well make Devitt’s task easier than it would be were the non-modal version at issue. Remember that Devitt is trying to undermine the supposed motivation for believing in the a priori by establishing that there is an empirical (Quinean) story to be told about how we have our seemingly distinctive knowledge of mathematics and logic. If the motivation is supposed to be that such knowledge *cannot* be empirical, then all he needs to do to undermine it is describe a way in which that knowledge *could* be justified (and, if required, undermined) by experience. But if the motivation is supposed to be that the knowledge in question *is* not empirical, it is surely not enough to describe such a possibility. Whether the modality is alethic or epistemic, Devitt’s task is made easier by its inclusion.

If something like (a) were the correct interpretation of the motivation for the a priori that Devitt is trying to undermine, then his merely coherently describing the Quinean account obviously could suffice to make it plausible that that account is ‘possible’ in the relevant sense. It is, admittedly, harder to see how it could make it ‘possible’ in either of the senses required to undermine (b). By merely describing an account you do not automatically make it plausible that it is true in some close possible world. If this

⁶ There is a tradition, inspired partly by Kant, of denying that experience *can possibly* give one knowledge of modal truths such as *Necessarily 7+5=12*. Devitt, however, does not seem to have modal truths specifically in mind. Nor do I think this tradition is on the right track; it is pretty clear to me that one can acquire knowledge of modal truths through testimony, inference to the best explanation, and other empirical means.

⁷ Or more accurately, to the extent that this does seem to me fairly certain, *this* seeming is due to my theoretical beliefs about the a priori, rather than being the kind of intuitive or pre-theoretical seeming that Devitt is after.

is what Devitt is attempting, I need to hear more. But it still, in general, considerably easier to make it plausible that p is correct in some close world than it is to make it plausible that p is actually the case.

Even on the epistemic reading (c), which I think is the most likely to be what Devitt and his envisaged opponents intend, the task of undermining the motivation is made *easier* by the presence of the modality, even if it is not made quite as easy as Devitt's argumentative strategy suggests he thinks. For it is surely easier to undermine an intuition *that p is certain* than it is to undermine an intuition *that p* . By merely describing Quinean holism, Devitt might hope to make it sound plausible enough to convince the previously unconvinced that it *just might* be the correct account of our apparently a priori knowledge, thus undermining any intuitive certainty that it isn't. Even this is not guaranteed to happen, of course, but it is even less likely that merely describing Quinean holism should convince the previously unconvinced that it *is* the correct account of our apparently a priori knowledge, or otherwise convince them that it is, despite appearances, not the case that this knowledge is genuinely a priori.

It's true that if one accepts a modal claim like (a), (b) or (c) one is reasonably likely also to accept obvious non-modal consequences of that claim (at least, once the relevant question is raised). For instance, if one believes that it is certain that knowledge of p is non-empirical, then one is likely also to accept that knowledge of p is non-empirical. Thus it might seem that Devitt's strategy of showing that the knowledge in question does not *have* to be non-empirical and leaving matters there will not be successful in any case, since the non-modal point remains to be dealt with and may by itself suffice to motivate a priorism. However, that thought is a bit quick. It could be that one's *only* reason for believing the relevant non-modal claim is that one accepts the modal claim. Sometimes we believe p only because it seems to us that things cannot be any other way. And when it transpires that they can, our motivation for p disappears. It must be said, however, that Devitt has not, as far as I can tell, argued that anything of that kind is going on in this case.

I myself think that the (non-modal) intuition that certain kinds of knowledge are distinctively independent of experience is one important kind of motivation for believing in the a priori, and I find this non-modal claim directly plausible (as opposed to finding it plausible only because I believe some modal version). To what extent, then, can this motivation of mine for believing in the a priori be undermined by Devitt's indicating that there is a possible empirical account of this supposedly a priori knowledge? I do not see that it can be undermined at all by such means. That is one key reason why I remain unconvinced by Devitt's argument that believing in the a priori is unmotivated.

Another is that I think there are other possible motivations for believing in the a priori which Devitt does not address. I shall not attempt an exhaustive list of these here; many depend too heavily on particular epistemological views to be of general interest. (For example, Field's nonfactualism about at least certain kinds of epistemic normativity give him a reason to accept the a priori to which one could not expect Devitt to be amenable. See e.g. Field 2000 for details.) I shall just describe a type of motivation to which I think many of those who call themselves 'naturalists' might be receptive.

Suppose, not that we have an *intuition* to the effect that certain pieces of knowledge to be independent of experience (necessarily or otherwise), but that the *best account* of how we have that knowledge entails that we have it a priori. That, I take it, would give us some motivation for believing in the a priori, especially if we also had reason to think the account *good enough*.

I myself am often inclined to think that this is the case; the account I sketch in AUTHOR (on which more below) strikes me as strictly preferable Quine's. Like Quine's, it requires no additional faculties beyond the sensory apparatus that we all acknowledge, but does better at accommodating the intuition that some knowledge is distinctively independent of experience, does not require commitment to justificatory holism for propositions, and does not threaten to leave knowledge of dispensable mathematical propositions unaccounted for (see AUTHOR, pp. 152-3). In my opinion, it does this without compensating loss of other theoretical virtues, and I don't know of any other account that performs equally well or better.

Note that there is nothing essential about my appeal to my own views here. Anyone who thinks some *other* a priorist account of our putatively a priori knowledge of mathematics and logic outperforms all rival accounts of that knowledge (including Quine's) will be able to muster a motivation along the lines I am interested here.

As is shown by the discussion of the advantages I take my account to have over Quine's, the sort of motivation for believing in the a priori currently under consideration *could* be in some ways related to the one discussed in the preceding passages, since it could be that *one* thing contributing to making the best account best is the fact that it respects the intuition that certain pieces of knowledge are distinctively independent of experience. But this certainly *need* not be the case; and anyway, there are bound to be other contributing factors. In the case I just described, my preference for the account of AUTHOR over Quine's would not go away if we ignored the intuition that some knowledge is distinctively independent of experience; the two further advantages that I mentioned (at least) would remain. In any case, to show that the intuition itself was not motivating by itself would not be to show that the intuition could not *contribute* to more sophisticated kinds of motivation.

So this kind of motivation is worthy of independent consideration. And it seems pretty clear that merely describing a Quinean alternative to a priorism would do nothing to undermine such a motivation, unless perhaps one's interlocutor had not yet considered the Quinean account and, for that reason only, had failed to notice that it is as good as (or better than) her preferred a priorist account. This is most unlikely to be true of the kind of dialectical opponents Devitt has in his sights.

Devitt does claim (2005a, p 106) to be able to establish that 'the *best* explanation of that knowledge is that it is empirical' (emphasis in original), on the basis of having established as premises (1) that a priori explanations are troubling and (2) that an empirical explanation is available. He claims that therefore 'we have a nice abduction' in favour of his kind of naturalism. But I do not think that establishing these two premises, even if he has done so, suffices to show that the best explanation of the knowledge in question is empirical. It could be, for instance, that the a priori explanations are troubling, and yet the

empirical one described turns out to be even more so, so that one of a priori explanations is still the best we have.

It is also worth noting that even supposing it to be established the best explanation of the knowledge in question is one on which it is empirical, that would not suffice to show that any empirical account is *good enough* to merit belief. In this way, the abductive inference to Devittian naturalism could still be resisted.

The last point I want to make concerning this part of Devitt's argument is that explanatoriness is not the only theoretical virtue. It could be granted that a priorist accounts of mathematical and logical knowledge are not great *explanations* of the knowledge, but then argued that they are *simpler* than the alternative accounts, or more *elegant*, or more *coherent with other areas of enquiry*, and so on, and hence at least as well-deserving of belief as Quinean holism. In response, Devitt could try pointing out virtues of the Quinean picture: it is plausibly a virtue, for example, that it offers a relatively simple and thoroughly unified picture of how all our knowledge is secured. But a careful weighing up of the pros and cons of that picture and the alternatives would then be required in order for the debate to move on, and this is something which Devitt has not given us.

I don't intend to defend any claims about the virtues of the Quinean account or its rivals here. My purpose is merely to point out that a second way in which one might resist the step from 'some empirical account of our knowledge of logic and mathematics provides the best explanation of that knowledge' and *either* 'an empirical account of that knowledge is correct'. But if he cannot make that step, it is still on the table that the best account of the knowledge in question – the account most deserving of belief – is some kind of a priorist account.

3. Devitt's Second Argument

The aim of the second half of Devitt's attack on the a priori is to argue that 'the whole idea of the a priori is too obscure for it to feature in a good explanation of our knowledge of anything' (2005, p. 111). He proceeds to note that a priori knowledge is often characterized negatively, as knowledge which is *not* derived from experience, and states that a positive characterization is needed 'if we are to take the a priori way [of justifying a belief] seriously'.

I am happy to grant that traditional attempts to tell a positive story about how the a priori works are unsuccessful. In particular, I am sympathetic to Devitt's criticisms of attempts which appeal to analyticity and conceptual competence, of which he asks questions like the following (forthcoming, p. 14):

even if reflection did lead to these beliefs, why suppose that, simply in virtue of her competence, this process of belief formation *justifies* the beliefs, or gives them any special epistemic authority ...?

Devitt criticizes Peacocke and Bealer, each of whom adopts a view within this tradition, on the grounds that neither really answers this kind of question. Peacocke never explains why a belief which is bound up with the possession conditions of a concept should be, just in virtue of that, an epistemically *good* thing to believe. And Bealer never explains why concepts must be such that any 'intuitions' the having which is constitutive of those concepts are bound to be true.

I agree with Devitt about Peacocke. I would put the point about Bealer slightly differently; Bealer is at liberty to stipulate that his term 'concepts' is reserved for things such that the intuitions constitutive of possessing them are true. But then he owes us an explanation of why he thinks we should take ourselves to *have* any concepts in this sense. (See AUTHOR for more detailed discussion of my objections to the accounts offered by Peacocke and Bealer.)

I am also happy to grant to Devitt that BonJour's attempts to make the a priori unmysterious are unsuccessful, based as they are primarily on our supposed phenomenological familiarity with a priori rational insight. As we've seen, I am prepared to allow that there seems to be some knowledge which is not empirical, and perhaps this is close to admitting the kind of phenomenology as of a priori insight to which BonJour intends to draw attention. I do not think this makes the a priori unmysterious, however. But my reasons are a little different from those Devitt offers, so I shall briefly explain why.

Devitt's response to BonJour's move from phenomenological familiarity to unmysteriousness is to say that 'nothing in the experience of having an intuition supports the view that *it is a priori* or, indeed supports *any* view of what justifies the intuition' (forthcoming, p. 16; Devitt refers back to this comment about phenomenology when discussing BonJour on p. 18). But I don't find this response satisfying in this context. BonJour may use the appeal to phenomenology partly as a basis for confidence in the *existence* of the a priori, but he also uses it as grounds for rejecting the claim that the a priori is mysterious or obscure. It is the latter kind of use that concerns us here, but Devitt's comment looks like a response to the former kind.

I think a better way to respond to the thought that phenomenological familiarity reduces or removes the mysteriousness of the a priori is simply to point out that the kind of mystery involved hasn't much to do with unfamiliarity. What's mysterious about the a priori (to me, at least) is the *theoretical strangeness* of knowledge that can apparently be obtained without experience of the world. This strikes me as strange because I do not know of any way besides experience in which we can be epistemically receptive to the world. The kind of 'naturalism' to which I cleave (roughly, the position that some sort of scientific world-view is broadly correct) instructs against belief in faculties in which our scientific studies of ourselves and our cognitive lives give us no reason to believe. Such studies do not give me reason to believe in a faculty of rational intuition, as they do give me reason to believe in faculties of vision, hearing, and so on.

Such minor divergences aside, however, I am on Devitt's side with regard to the question of whether accounts like those of Peacocke, Bealer and BonJour resolve the mysteriousness of a priori knowledge. I think that they don't.

However, unlike Devitt, I also think there is more to be said. What more, exactly, is a delicate question. Half of the time, I want to say: one can believe in a priori knowledge and justification *whilst accepting* that there are no non-empirical ways of knowing. A quarter of the time, I am not sure that this is the best way of putting things.⁸ I'll explain these remarks in a moment. But one thing I am sure of most days is that there is an option that Devitt does not consider, which is distinct both from traditional accounts of the a priori and from the kind of straightforward Quinean holism that Devitt embraces.

I don't mean to implicate that there is exactly one such option. But the one I shall discuss bears interesting relationships to both traditional accounts and the Quinean picture. These, I think, make it an appropriate object of interest to philosophers inclined towards some form of naturalism, and enable me to use it to indicate a certain amount of distance between what Devitt's second argument establishes and what he concludes. (It also happens to be the option I consider most promising, though that does not matter so much for my purposes.)

The option I have in mind is the one that I've described most thoroughly in AUTHOR. The view, in outline, is that we can secure certain kinds of knowledge by relying on guidance provided by our concepts, but that the only reason this is possible is that the concepts in question are related to experience in such a way as to make this process a trustworthy guide to the world. I like to think of the view this way: our concepts are sensitive to our experience, and as a result they form a trustworthy on-board map of certain aspects of the world's structure. We can read information off this map by engaging in activities such as the ones philosophers sometimes call 'conceptual analysis' and 'conceptual examination', and by engaging in certain of the activities which the folk would call 'just thinking about things'. But the information got *in* there, as it were, via our experience of the world. This is the process I describe as (empirical) concept grounding.

One thing I like about this story is that it accommodates the distinctive phenomenology of (putative) a priori knowledge in a rather more satisfying way than does the Quinean manoeuvre of saying that such knowledge is special only in being relatively central to the web of belief and less likely to be revised in the face of recalcitrant experience. *We really do* have a different way of coming to know the truths of (say) mathematics and logic, and this way *really does* (at least sometimes) proceed through analysis or examination of concepts, just as it seems to. The apparent epistemic independence of experience enjoyed by knowledge secured in this way is neatly explained: experience plays its epistemic role solely in the grounding of our concepts, which is a process that we need not, and probably will not, have much or any awareness of. (I make some suggestions about how it might work in AUTHOR). The part of the process of which we *are* – at least sometimes – aware is the part where we examine our concepts (or just: think), and read off information such as that $7+5=12$. We do this in the armchair; no further input from experience is required at this stage. Naturally, it seems to us as if the information were being secured without reliance on experience at all.

This is not the place for detailed discussion of this account of this type of knowledge. What I do want to do, however, is mention a relevant point from my 2008b; namely that, *on many definitions*, knowledge

⁸ The other quarter of the time I'm not sure whether I'm sure.

secured in the way just described will count as ‘a priori’. Of course, if ‘a priori’ is defined simply as ‘non-empirical’, this won’t work. But other features that might be considered characteristic of the a priori are features of the kind of knowledge I’ve sketched. For example:

- (a) The knowledge is epistemically independent of empirical *evidence*. The kind of work experience does in grounding a concept is *not*, I think, the same kind of work that it does in evincing a proposition. (Of course, some piece of experience could do both kinds of work at once, but that is irrelevant.) For more discussion of this issue see AUTHOR.
- (b) The knowledge is independent of the kind of *immediate* empirical grounding that some people think we have for propositions about how things current appear to us. It is also independent of *inductive* empirical grounds, of empirical *testing*, and of the kind of *holistic* empirical grounding for an entire theory that the Quinean believes in. Indeed, it seems that none of the classic kinds of a posteriori grounding is in play.
- (c) Rather, it is in virtue of one’s *understanding* – that is, one’s grasp of certain concepts – that one secures the knowledge.
- (d) The kind of justification secured in this manner could only be undermined if it turned out that our way of conceptualizing the world was inappropriate.

Today, I’ll say that features like these mean that we get the best continuity with existing usage of the phrase ‘a priori’ if we include within its extension the kind of knowledge that is secured through examination of empirically grounded concepts. It is also worth noting that we can use the terms ‘empirical’ and ‘non-empirical’ to mark the distinction between the empirical and the non-empirical, freeing up the terms ‘a priori’ and ‘a posteriori’ to do the kind of work I have in mind.

What all this suggests is that there is a kind of a priori knowledge the existence of which is not in tension with the spirit of Devitt’s naturalism. The knowledge is ultimately empirical; there is no mysterious faculty of rational intuition that enables us to know about the world without relying on experience. With regard to the letter of Devitt’s naturalism, I see no reason why that sort of knowledge should present problems for the claim that ‘epistemology is part of science’ (Devitt forthcoming, p. 1, fn. 1). Nor does the account I’ve sketched in any way oppose the view that ‘all knowledge is [justified by experience]’.

There is, however, a reading of the claim that ‘there is only one way of knowing’ (which Devitt 2005a, p. 105 takes to be part of his naturalism) on which it does not sit comfortably with the account of a priori knowledge that I’ve sketched. For on that account, there are at least *two* ways of knowing: the ordinary empirical way(s), and the way that proceeds through the examination of empirically grounded concepts. But there is another way to interpret Devitt so that even this part of his naturalism is consistent with the view I’ve outlined: if the claim that ‘there is only one way of knowing’ is meant to be merely a trivial consequence the claim that all justification is empirical, then in that sense I need not disagree with him that there is only one way of knowing, and it is through experience.

Insofar as what I have said in this section is correct, Devitt’s claim that the a priori is too obscure to be taken seriously needs further defence. There is an account of a priori knowledge and a priori

justification which he has not argued against. In my opinion this account makes good sense of how justification and knowledge could be a priori (or at least: have many of the key qualities traditionally associated with the a priori), and therefore avoids the obscurity and mystery of which Devitt accuses the more traditional a priorist views that he discusses. The account is moreover consistent with (at least most and perhaps all of) Devitt's naturalism.

Even if we do not want to describe such knowledge as a priori in the end (and I am not concerned to argue terminology with those who prefer not to do so), its very possibility puts pressure on Devitt's move from the failure of *traditional* a priorist accounts of mathematical and logical knowledge to the correctness of the Quinean account. What I'm trying to show by discussing the AUTHOR proposal is that, even for a naturalist, there are other options.

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[NB: Page numbers within this draft refer to this online draft of Devitt 2007, and will be updated when the pagination for *Putting Metaphysics First* is available:
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