

V74MK1 Mind and Knowledge 1

Seminar 3

A Priori Knowledge

BonJour: 'In Defense of the a Priori'

- A priori knowledge and a priori justification and a priori reasons
 - Justification is a requirement for knowledge and consists of reasons
 - Minimal rationalism
- Negative: rational force of an a priori reason not derived from experience
 - Experience may be required for understanding
 - Experience could *also* count as evidence
 - Experience might override an a priori reason
 - A priori reasons don't have to make anything certain or infallible
- Experience
 - Senses
 - Introspection (*cogito*)
- Positive: direct or immediate rational insight of (necessary) truth
 - Sometimes called 'intuitions'
 - Revealing that *and why* something is (must be) true
 - Often (always?) non-propositional (to avoid Lewis Carroll problem)
- Argument from examples (p. 100)
 - There 'seem' to be many cases. (Intuitive 'seeming'?)
 - 'Seeing' or 'grasping' (necessary) truth
 - Challenge to a priori deniers: account for these in an experiential way
- Second argument: need a priori insight into the connections between directly empirically confirmed claims and indirectly empirically confirmed claims in order to have any indirect empirical confirmation
 - $(E \rightarrow H)$
 - Do we need justification to *believe* such things in order for the corresponding *inferences* to be justified?
 - If we did, couldn't we run a similar argument concerning $(E+AP \rightarrow H)$?
 - Block: a priori insight sometimes non-proposition
 - Why can't empirical insight be sometimes non-propositional too?
- Generalized form of second argument (p. 103): need a priori insight to make *any* rational inference
 - Threat of 'intellectual suicide'
- Moderate empiricism
 - A priori reasons reflect 'only linguistic or conceptual conventions' rather than reality
 - Analyticity
 - Reductive conceptions and obfuscating conceptions

- Radical empiricism
 - There are no a priori reasons
 - Quine's main arguments against the a priori are arguments against moderate empiricism; not relevant
 - Argument from Quine-Duhem holism begs the question
 - Circularity worry (p. 105)
 - (If a theory is appropriately related to experience and satisfies the other Quinean conditions, then it is likely to be true)
 - This conditional not justified directly by experience
 - Not justified by meeting the Quinean conditions (circular)

Devitt: 'There Is No a Priori'

- Naturalism: all knowledge is empirical (radical empiricism)
- Intuitive motivation for the a priori: seems some knowledge cannot be accounted for empirically
- Problem: the a priori is deeply obscure
- We can undercut the motivation by providing an alternative account of the supposed APK
 - The intuitions are really just intuitions of lack of *direct* empirical confirmation (p. 107) and are preserved
- Is Devitt's a fair statement of this kind of intuitive motivation?
 - Devitt makes it modal; Bonjour's is not modal
- Could there be other motivations?
- Undercutting motivation + demonstrating obscurity gives us 'a nice abduction' in favour of naturalism (p. 106)
- Undercutting the motivation
 - Quinean holism generates alternative account
 - Not a complete epistemology, but we don't have that for anything
 - Necessities can be known empirically (e.g. water is necessarily H₂O)
- On the generalized form of Bonjour's second argument:
 - S: one's evidential system (rules for belief)
 - T: S is a good evidential system
 - Cf. Bonjour's conditional: (If a theory is appropriately related to experience and satisfies the other Quinean conditions, then it is likely to be true)
 - Objection amounts to: T can only be known a priori
 - Response: T doesn't appear to be supported a priori but empirically. The overall empirical success of S supports T.
 - Circular?
 - Only rule-circularity, not premise-circularity
 - And we would have the same kind of rule-circularity if T were justified a priori (p. 111)
 - (Direct atomic rational insight into T? Still circular.)

- Only grounds for pessimism about the a priori
- Need a positive characterization, not just a negative one
 - At least we have *some idea* how empirical knowledge works (and everyone believes in it)
- Failure of traditional attempts based on analyticity
 - Having the concept <bachelor> means you have a tacit theory of that concept as including the concept <unmarried>
 - Just pushes the question back to knowledge of e.g. *all unmarrieds are unmarried*
 - Shouldn't assume in any case that concept possession involves tacit theory of this kind; it is knowledge-how not knowledge-that
 - And why would forming beliefs on the basis of conceptual competence mean that those beliefs were *justified* or *knowledgeable*?
 - Cf Field ('Recent Debates about the A Priori'): what if the concepts are just 'bad' ones?
- Bonjour's 'rational insight'
 - 'Quasi-perceptual'; where is the *justification*?
 - Not much explanation of what it is
 - Bonjour thinks this isn't a problem because it *has* to be accepted
 - But it doesn't
 - Phenomenological familiarity
 - But the phenomenology doesn't tell us that what we're experiencing are rational insights
 - 'What sort of link *could* there be, other than via experience, that would make states of the mind/brain likely to be true about the world?' (p. 114)