

A Priori Seminar, Part I 16/2/18

Reading: Christensen & Kornblith 1997. Testimony, Memory, and the Limits of the *A Priori*.

Present: Josh, Xintong, Sam, Paul, Giacomo, Peter, Alisa, Sonia, Gabriela Besler, Asgeir, Crispin, Jonathan, Carrie

Presenter: Josh

Apriority and testimony

Crispin makes two remarks concerning Burge's proposal; first, that a diagram has a subtler role to play in a priori reasoning than a prompt, and second, that we need to draw a distinction between supportive and undermining reasons. **Giacomo** points out that C&K fail to account for the gap between defeaters and justification: In both the diagram and stop-sign cases that C&K present, there is an empirical defeater, but what they need to show is that in the second case the empirical component is not only part of the defeater but also part of the justification.

Josh notes that, given that Burge is proposing an account of how the justification from testimony can be a priori, there seems to be room in it for empirical defeaters. **Josh** wonders whether Burge really needs a general account of what merely defeats a priori justification and what is part of the justification.

Peter—in response to Crispin's first point—wonders why cannot Burge accept that the role of a diagram in a priori reasoning is more than that of triggering an understanding of the propositions. The criticism that K&C present is, in a nutshell, that it is just obvious that if someone says that *p*, then *that the person said that p* is part of your justification for believing that *p*, (or that beliefs you acquire from informants are sensitive to the reliability of those informants). **Peter** thinks this point must be correct but wonders whether it really applies to what Burge is interested in. **Peter** conjectures that Burge might be interested in knowledge "by osmosis," as it were, knowledge that is just picked up from somewhere without there being any obvious direct informant on which one explicitly relies. **Crispin** asks Peter whether acquiring information about the source and its reliability would change the justification in such cases, and suggests that if it does, then the question is: how does it do that? In response, **Peter** proposes the case where one knows that, say, Dar es Salaam is in Tanzania, and then realizes that it has learned it from a, say, Ian Fleming's novel: learning about the source does not seem to change the character of the justification, despite the fact that the source was a work of fiction. **Crispin** suggests that that's because there is an assumption that Fleming wouldn't fictionalize the location of cities. **Giacomo** suggests that Peter seems to be thinking about cases where one has forgotten about the original source of justification, rather than cases where one acquires knowledge by osmosis (i.e. from no particular source). **Carrie** asks Peter whether the cases he has in mind are those where we are embedded in a network of multiple potential sources, i.e. where there are many ways of stumbling upon the same belief. **Peter** suggests that that might be a way of accounting for knowledge by osmosis, and **Carrie** notes that, from what he says, Burge does not seem to be concerned with these cases.

Crispin—[in response to **Josh**'s attempt to defend Burge against C&K's criticism, see handout p. 2]—points out that clocks are not natural objects but artefacts designed to indicate a certain correlation. The clock, **Crispin** suggests, may thus be ultimately considered to be a rational source. If the clock does not count as a rational source, it should be explained why not. **Josh** points out that in a footnote Burge says that his account applies to beliefs acquired from computers doing mathematics which suggests

that Burge would accept that we can get a priori knowledge by looking at machines. Burge would probably not agree that we can get a priori knowledge of time by looking at clocks, but this is not because it involves looking at a machine. In response, **Crispin** proposes the following thought-experiment: imagine a world that only has sundials and where I am fed up with always having to tell you what time it is. I then invent a clock, so that instead of you asking me, you can look at the clock. By looking at the clock, you get something like a deferred testimonial knowledge. **Josh** responds that Burge might be happy to say that, in this case, when you trace the justification back, it will turn out to be empirical.

Peter notes It is not part of Burge's view that by looking at a clock you know a priori *that it is 3.15* or even *that you get a priori knowledge by looking at a clock*. All that is a priori is *that by looking at clocks you can get information about time*. That is why Burge emphasizes that one gets a priori entitlements.

Crispin distinguishes between the "modest Burge" and the "loony Burge". Modest Burge says that testimony preserves the character of justification. We then get the question: what counts as coming from a rational source? If testimony does, does looking at a clock? Loony Burge says that testimony changes the character of the justification to a priori. C&K often seem to be taking issue with "loony Burge" [and this may very well reveal a misunderstanding of Burge's position].

Peter is not clear about what modest Burge is saying. **Peter**—continuing his previous point—suggests that the qualifier 'it is a priori' should be right up front, so that we obtain that "it is a priori that we are entitled to rely on deliverances of testimony", but wonders whether modest Burge puts it somewhere else. For example, if we put in the middle of the sentence, we obtain: "we are a priori entitled to rely on deliverances of testimony". In the former case we are saying that "we are entitled to rely on deliverances of testimony" is an a priori truth. In the latter case we are saying that the entitlement under discussion is a priori entitlement. (**Crispin** adds "operator-shift Burge" to the list.)

Crispin wonders what the view looks like, once Peter's point is taken into account—that being a priori warranted to rely on testimony does not imply that one is a priori warranted to believe the thing received via testimony? **Peter** connects this to his earlier point concerning knowledge "by osmosis" by noting that the only way the operator shifting step could be made is if the way one is informed (i.e. the source) is completely insignificant. As soon as the way one is informed matters, the operator shouldn't be shifted. That is why Burge might be taken to be talking about knowledge by osmosis rather than instances of informing—i.e. about justification that is out there which is mine because I am properly related to it.

Josh disagrees with Peter's reading, suggesting that Burge is nevertheless concerned with cases where the informant is in the picture, not with cases of knowledge "by osmosis". Burge explicitly focuses on knowledge that comes from a rational source—the contentfulness of the utterance is supposed to suggest that the source is rational. **Peter** responds by raising again the point about the scope of the operator. On Burge's view, it is a priori *that content that is presented to you comes from rational source*. It is never a priori that *this specific content* comes from a rational source. **Giacomo** notes that we had noted a similar issue when we read Burge last autumn: from having an a priori entitlement to accept a content presented from a rational source does not follow that one thereby acquires an a priori warrant for the specific content that is given to the agent by the rational source.

Apriority and memory

Crispin suggests that there is an analogy between memory and other cognitive faculties. Just like perceptual justification does not normally rely on inferences from propositions about perception, so when memory provides justification, the justification normally does not involve any proposition *about*

memory. If the analogy applies, Burge is concerned with routine cases, rather than memory as such. **Peter** adds that in cases where memory preserves justification, what is preserved is a proposition with its justificatory status. No subject is involved, then. The memory in question is not first-personal memory—it only sustains the proposition I had, which is about e.g. the angles of a triangle, not about me. [This presumably links to Peter’s point about knowledge by osmosis. The justification involved does not concern the agent being informed in some specific way e.g. by being told that p by a rational informant.]

Paul takes issue with the example discussed by C&K at p. 14, and wonders why couldn’t the agent be said to have a priori knowledge even if s/he doesn’t know whether the justification is a priori or a posteriori. **Peter** responds that Burge does want to say that such agents have different justification.

Peter points out footnote 11 in C&K’s paper where C&K acknowledge that they are focusing on what Burge calls “proprietary” justification, while the notion of justification that Burge is concerned with is not proprietary but the wider notion. So, C&K themselves declare that they are talking past Burge. **Giacomo** suggests that what C&K are implicitly suggesting is that what matters is proprietary justification.

Jonathan wonders why should we take the result highlighted by C&K’s case (p. 14) [that two agents with the same memories who both happen to have forgotten the original source of their justification to believe P may nevertheless have justifications to believe P with different empirical a priori status] to be counterintuitive—why shouldn’t we say that what is a priori depends on how you came to believe it? **People** agree.

Crispin suggests that the Viking Case is plausible, if it can be shown that preservative memory is sub-personally inferential, i.e. the actual cognitive architecture involved in memory is inferential. The fact that it is sub-personal should make no difference. What matters is whether it gives outputs in the inferentially robust sense. **Peter** points out that then we get to Lawlor’s point that C&K deny that there is something like preservative memory in Burge’s sense.

Peter provides a gloss on the Viking Case as a variant of the Fake Barn Case. The beliefs that Sam acquired from an unreliable source function as fake barns. There are more fake barns around Sam than there are around Sophie. Sam is in fake barn county and has happened to latch onto a barn with a decent ancestry. But given that Burge is not concerned with justification that is sensitive to the ancestry of the belief, the Viking Case misses its mark.

Josh reminds us that Burge is not saying that if you remember that p, then you know a priori that p, but only that if you remember some *math result*, then you know it a priori. Given this, **Josh** suggests, the inferential links should not be a problem, since math beliefs are presumably related inferentially to other math beliefs and not to empirical beliefs. **Giacomo** wonders whether false mathematical beliefs or simply mathematical beliefs obtained in epistemically bad ways might still pose a problem.

Peter provides a brief summary: Burge has a priori arguments that there must be preservative memory in his sense, but he does not show how much of it there must be.