

A PRIORI BRAINSTORMING SESSION 06.04.18

Present: Giacomo, Giovanni, Peter, Crispin, Jonathan, Carrie, Sonia, Xintong, Sam, Indrek, Paul, Josh, Alisa, Leonardo Ceragioli

In the seminar, we went over the questions on the first page of the handout in order. All of them concerned the warranting-enabling distinction.

1. Paul's question

Paul clarifies his question: Given our previous discussions of the warranting-enabling distinction, it is no longer clear whether experience should be thought of as playing an enabling or a warranting role. **Crispin** agrees that for the distinction to be robust, the enabling role should be understood in terms of what gives access to a fact, but then perception turns out to play an enabling role both in the a priori and in the a posteriori case. Consequently, the warranting-enabling distinction no longer serves the intended purpose of distinguishing the role of experience in the two cases.

Paul's and **Crispin's** worry was first raised in connection to Jonathan's view discussed last semester. **Jonathan** notes that an important piece of the view he and Jarvis defended is that there is nothing in the a priori case to be playing a warranting role—only rational capacities to figure out what's true are needed. In this sense, it is only in the a posteriori case that experience provides access to a warrant. The key difference between the a priori and the a posteriori case is that in the latter, failure to know, e.g. that it is raining, does not impinge on your rationality. But a failure to know an a priori truth does. [The underlying suggestion is that the disanalogy between these two ways of failing to know may serve as a stepping stone to vindicate a disanalogy in the extent of what plays the enabling role in paradigmatic a priori and a posteriori cases; namely, access to the relevant facts in the a priori cases, and something less than that in the a posteriori cases.]

Peter asks Crispin whether he means that in both cases it is a broad background of experience that provides the access or that there is in both cases some reliance on the content of some particular experience—e.g. observations of diagrams in the a priori case.

In response to Jonathan, **Crispin** notes that we can distinguish between two questions: 1) How to distinguish between failures to come to a view that impinge on rationality from failures that

don't? 2) What plays the justificational role in the a priori and the a posteriori case? The second question raises the following dilemma: If all justifiers are things outside the mind that we have access to, then the warranting-enabling distinction is unhelpful. We would have an interesting distinction, only if justifiers are states of the mind. **Giacomo** notes that we might not want to say the same thing in both cases—justifiers in the a priori case might be mental states but justifiers in the a posteriori case might be things outside the mind.

In response to Jonathan's point, **Giovanni** wonders why the failure to know in the a posteriori case does not impinge on rationality. One might say that a failure to recognize that the cup is on the table is a failure on the part of the subject. Based on this, it might be argued that the a priori and the a posteriori case are on a par after all. **Jonathan** responds that he and Jarvis were trying to go the other way. They take the difference concerning how a priori and a posteriori knowledge relate to rationality to be fundamental, and show how it can be put to work. In response to Jonathan, **Crispin** notes that the distinction is plausible—some failures to recognize a truth are failures of rationality but failures in perceptual cases to recognize a truth are not—, but the challenge is to explain why is this distinction epistemologically important. It may be right that deafness is not a failure of rationality, but this is not obviously theoretically interesting. Accounts of the a priori purport to explain why a priori justification is radically different from empirical justification. In a sense, justification acquired by sight and justification acquired by hearing are also different kinds of justification, but we want the distinction between a priori and empirical justification to be deeper than that.

Carrie points out that the labels 'enabling' and 'warranting' come from Williamson, and that Williamson's way of setting up the distinction might not be the most fruitful. The worry, in other words, is that the debate is stuck in a loop that Williamson has spun. In her own work, **Carrie** used the labels to account for different roles experience can play in acquisition of knowledge. The evidential role is one of them, but there can be many others. **Giacomo** responds that we nevertheless need a general story about what it is for experience to play an evidential role rather than enabling one, otherwise we will not have an answer to whether experience plays an evidential role in the a priori case. **Carrie** responds that the label 'enabling' might be putting us in a strait jacket. What matters for an account of the evidential role of experience is e.g. what evidence is. In Williamson's binary set-up, this question doesn't get addressed. **Jonathan** follows up on Carrie, noting that even in the case of straightforwardly a posteriori scientific knowledge we need to distinguish the evidential role of experience from other roles

that experience also plays. So, an account of the evidential role is not just needed as part of an account of the a priori.

2. (a) on Crispin's list

Giacomo wonders why the ultimate grounds for knowledge of conceptual truths is not empirical. In one's knowledge that all bachelors are unmarried experience plays an enabling role in the sense that it is involved in grasping the concepts *bachelor* and *unmarried*. But ultimate grounds for that knowledge concern the relations between the concepts, and information about those comes from experience—from observations of how the concepts are used. So why are conceptual truths ultimately not empirical? **Carrie** responds that this is the question she focuses on in her work. The answer she gives there is that conceptual truths are empirical, but the further question is then: in what way are they empirical, i.e. what role does experience play in concept grounding? Once the question is set up this way, we can ask whether experience plays an evidential role there, whether it provides a warrant, etc.

Crispin worries that Carrie's approach has a danger of missing an important distinction: it may account for concepts acquired by training in the application of concepts, but it's not clear that it accounts for stipulated concepts which are free of any application. An account of a priori knowledge concerns the epistemology of both. **Carrie** suggests that the problem is avoided with a distinction between basic and non-basic concepts. **Crispin** worries that there is still an important distinction to be accounted for: even if experience grounds one's concept of the conditional, it does not do so in the same way as it grounds one's concept of a square. **Carrie** responds that concept grounding should be thought of in a Quinean way, i.e. as molecular grounding. The reason is that concepts are all sub-propositional but experience can only play an evidential role at the level of propositions. Given this set up, it might turn out that in some cases there is no evidential role for experience to play [the relevant cases are those of analytic propositions, where the justification comes down to relations between concepts, and concepts are acquired in an empirical but not evidential way]. In response to Carrie, **Giacomo** wonders what would play the warranting role in the a priori case. **Carrie** responds that, if anything plays a warranting role at all, then the warranting role would be something like a harvesting role (as per Jonathan's suggestion). The information to be acquired is already in your concept structure.

3. (b) on Crispin's list

Peter wonders about the case of knowing that horses are animals. One doesn't know it on the basis of any particular experience, but on the basis of what horses are. But the latter is just

knowing the concept *horse*. It is thus not clear whether we have a notion of different roles of experience we are trying to capture. How do we apply it in those cases that look substantial? The way I think of horses and animals is shaped by the world I live in. **Crispin** clarifies that the cases he had in mind were those where imagination is used offline, but one could in principle do the same thing by relying on actual experience, i.e. where imagination is like ersatz of experience. Having lots of actual experiences makes one better at it. **Giacomo** proposes that experiences improve one's skill of applying concepts.

4. (c) on Crispin's list

Giacomo asks whether (c) is a purely negative role. **Jonathan** responds that it is the role of the total course of your experience. **Giacomo** notes that it should also apply to a posteriori cases. Absence of defeaters is needed there, too.

Giovanni wonders what is our guide in deciding which of the roles on Crispin's list acceptable for experience to play in a priori knowledge and which are not. **Crispin** responds that experience can play all of them, as long as they don't compromise our intention with the rough idea of the evidential role. To explain what it is for experience to play an evidential role, we first need to do ground clearing.

5. (d) on Crispin's list

Crispin clarifies (d): It is not just the role of calling attention to important details but also of giving new information by supplying important details. For example: Any pair of circles intersects only at no points, two points or uncountably many points. One way of proving this is to construct a number of pictures and then jiggle them around in imagination. Experience may be needed to give you the visuals for the imagination. What you are then engaged in is reasoning with pictures, not with propositions.

Giacomo wonders why (d) couldn't be understood as concept acquisition. **Crispin** responds that it is because of Norman-style reasons: Someone can have the concept but still not grasp the proposition. **Giacomo** notes that it seems to be close to imaginations honing role (i.e. (b)). **Crispin** responds that it might be close but it is not exactly the same. Experience makes you better at imaginative constructions of a sort. It gives you knowledge of what things are like and you can then work on that basis. **Carrie** wonders if what Crispin has in mind is acquaintance. **Crispin** agrees. His proposal is that acquaintance is a source of information that cannot be propositionally captured.

6. (e) on Crispin's list

Crispin notes that he added (e) to the list to push back against a purificationist conception of a priori knowledge, and that the assumption that we need to get to pure intellection is a fundamental mistake. For example (cf. Crispin's paper we discussed in the first semester), the way one verifies that a cube has 12 edges may be thoroughly empirical. After inspecting a wire cube, one concludes that all cubes have 12 edges. The verification establishes the fully general conclusion. The conclusion is not just induction from one case. The verification process involves experience, but the step that warrants the generalization does not come from experience.

Carrie wonders whether there is a connection between Crispin's and Bonjour's view. Bonjour notes that an unrestricted generalization from a single case obviously suffers from terrible underdetermination, and then argued that if such a generalization is to be warranted, it must be warranted by something other than the direct experience. **Crispin** notes that this is not the case in logic. One doesn't infer the universal validity of modus ponens from an instance. In the cube case, you need to believe the proposition: this is how it is with this cube. Experience is obviously involved in that. If we are interested in apriority, we need to look at what goes on in the generalization. In short: A priori knowledge is not non-experiential but supra-experiential knowledge—it goes beyond what experience delivers, even if it couldn't have been acquired without the experience.

Giacomo wonders whether this means that one's justification for 'all cubes have 12 edges' has a crucial empirical component (so that the overall justification may be properly classified as empirical). **Crispin** responds that the role of experience might play a defeasible role in some cases—e.g. could the experience one initially needed be a hallucination without it defeating one's justification? It seems that in some cases it can and in others it cannot. **Giovanni** proposes that what the visualization does is help one to materialize the justification that is implicit in the proposition that all cubes have 12 edges, i.e. that the visualization helps with the harvesting. **Crispin** responds that this involves more than harvesting. This is shown by the fact that my justification of my generalization will be defeated when the initial experience was ungrounded or misbegotten in some way. It doesn't always but in some cases it does, e.g. in the case of bracket counting.

Peter asks Crispin what is being perceived in the cube case: *that this is a cube* or *that it has twelve edges*? It seems that it doesn't matter whether what you perceive is a cube. It seems to

be enough that you “see a cube in it”. What I’m perceiving might be half a cube as long as my imagination fills in the other half. This is where the a priori action starts.

Crispin responds by giving an example with a 2D representation of a cube. One can reason as follows: this 2D figure has 12 edges; it adequately represents what a cube is; so, a cube has 12 edges. The first premise is empirical, but the proof is still a priori. **Peter** wonders whether it matters whether the experience one starts out with is off by a little. **Crispin** responds that this depends on the case—e.g. in the case of a 2D representation of a dodecahedron it doesn’t. It is easy to see the cube in the representation and then jump to the conclusion that the representation itself is irrelevant.

Carrie wonders whether the empirical component can be factored out, so that the empirical warrant stays with the empirical component and the a priori warrant stays with the a priori component. **Crispin** agrees that this is a natural direction to take, and that it is worth thinking about how the factorization would look like. **Carrie** and **Crispin** give the factorization a try: 1) This dodecahedron has n sides. 2) If any dodecahedron has n sides, then all dodecahedrons have n sides. They model this after an analogous case with water: 1) This water is H_2O . 2) Water is such that if any is H_2O , then all water is H_2O . The second premise in the water case is allowed because water is a kind. But in the dodecahedron case the second premise is problematic. **Giacomo** notes that if we have empirical and a priori premises in an inference, we normally say that the conclusion is empirically warranted, so why isn’t the conclusion that all dodecahedrons have n sides isn’t empirical? **Crispin** replies that the factorization was meant to isolate the non-empirical component, which plays a crucial role in warranting the generality of the conclusion. **Giacomo** notes an affinity between this suggestion and Bonjour’s thought that any inference must rely on some a priori component, if it is to go warrant a conclusion that goes beyond what is directly experienced.

Peter summarizes Crispin’s point: that we are reaching something with such modal strength is a mark of apriority because our premises are far from adequate to support our conclusion. We might be getting too much out of the evidence, i.e. what is a priori known or knowable will be necessary. This counterfactual force of a priori knowledge hasn’t been a presupposition in our discussion before.