

A Priori seminar 13/4/18

Attending: Giacomo Melis, Josh Thorpe, Xintong Wei, Paul Conlan, Sam Symons, Indrek Lobus, Giovanni Merlo, Crispin Wright, Carrie Ichikawa Jenkins, Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa, Peter Sullivan, Leonardo Ceragioli

Presenting: Xintong Wei

Reading: Field "Recent Debates About the A Priori"

Sections 1&2

- **Giacomo** questioned whether Field rules out cases like the example on section 2 in the handout by invoking the clause that strong apriority be immune from *direct* empirical evidence. **Xintong** replied that there is a sense in which when experts tell me that my mathematical proof is fallacious, that is direct counterevidence. Suppose that they say that not-P, for example (where P is the conclusion of my alleged proof). **Crispin** further suggested that the example mentioned in the paper is one where the agent gets evidence that the proof that *p* is incorrect. That is not evidence that not-P. **Carrie** considers whether the clause that a priori warrants are immune from direct empirical evidence is simply meant to rule out cases testimonial evidence. **People** agree that Field's clause is ambiguous at least between "testimonial evidence does not count" and "evidence suggesting that the agent is unreliable does not count".
- **Crispin** posed the question as to whether we can propose a characterisation of a certain kind of evidence to vindicate Field's notion of strong apriority? **Jonathan** pointed out that Field's idea isn't a million miles away from Jarvis and Ichikawa's account of conclusive propositional justification, according to which a priori propositional warrants are immune from evidence of rational compromise **Giacomo** suggested an alternative – if we stick to the undermining and overriding defeaters talk, we might think that all overriding defeaters for a priori warrants are of the impure kind: they would suggest both that not-P and that the agent made some kind of mistake in forming her belief. That would not make a priori justification secure in the sense that it is indefeasible, there would still be both undermining and overriding defeat, but the overriding would only be of a specific kind. The suggestion is also close to the spirit of Ichikawa and Jarvis' proposal. **Carrie** commented that this seems to be close to what Field is driving at – he doesn't say strong a priori is indefeasible, but rather there are very specific sorts of defeater that apply. **Giacomo** wondered whether this is enough to vindicate the idea that a priori warrants are special in some strong sense? **Crispin** commented that Field comes close to saying something trivial/uninformative like 'defeat is ok as long as it's a priori defeat'. **Giacomo** suggested on Field's behalf that there might be something to this thought: saying that the only (overriding) defeaters that may affect a priori warrants are themselves a priori would allow us to assign a special place to a priori warranted beliefs in the process of belief-revision prompted by new empirical evidence. Namely, a priori warranted beliefs would be those that we hold fixed when we revise the rest of our beliefs in the light of empirical evidence; in that sense, they would guide our belief-revision. We might then have to revise our a priori beliefs in the light of further a priori considerations, but that would happen at the later stage. At the stage when we're revising our attitudes in the light of empirical evidence, a priori beliefs would not be in question. **Crispin** agreed with Giacomo, but commented that if our project is

characterisation, we can't help ourselves to that yet. We need first to explain what a priori warrants exactly are, and on that basis explain why they would be immune from that sort of defeat.

- **Josh** wondered why Field thinks that weak a priori (i.e. a priori warrants which are just as defeasible as empirical warrants) is not interesting? Not least it's interesting because it's mysterious. **Carrie** notes that she raised the same question in print ('A Priori Knowledge: Debates and Developments', *Philosophy Compass*, 2008). **Giovanni** notes that in "A priority: An evaluative notion" Field suggests that weak a priority entails that all default reasonable propositions, such as, for example "people usually tell the truth" are a priori warranted, and that is implausible. Thus, the interesting notion must be that of strong a priority, whereby only default reasonable propositions that are empirically indefeasible count as a priori. **Carrie** responded that this presumes that his view on default reasonableness is correct. **Josh** notes that Burge argues that we indeed have an a priori entitlement for propositions like "people usually tell the truth".
- **Crispin** suggested that the weak a priori contains some interesting content e.g. figuring out how the world works on the basis of thinking. In general, it seems that Field's focus on apriority as default entitlement leads him to neglect a priori cognitive achievements. **Jonathan** suggested that one reason one might find the notion of strong a priori more interesting than the weak one is that the former might account for the idea that a priori warrants concern things that we cannot be deceived about—can you imagine how the world would be if $2+2 \neq 4$?
- **Crispin** wondered how the interpretation of the claim that there is no genuine possibility of empirical revision (while there is an epistemic one) should be understood. The idea must be something like "there is no getting into a position where you really must revise", and yet that doesn't sound right: if experts inform me my proof is wrong, it seems I ought to revise, even if they're wrong. **Peter** suggested that the proposal looks like "there's no real possibility in which it would be right to revise", and given the necessity of logic and mathematics, this seems true. **Carrie** commented that Field might be conflating the idea of a 'genuine possibility' (understood as e.g. a metaphysical possibility) of a logical or mathematical proposition being false, and the possibility of there being empirical evidence that shows a logical or mathematical proposition being false. **Crispin** worries that if we understand genuine possibility as metaphysical possibility, then it might turn out that "Water is H₂O" is strongly a priori. We can't appeal to empirical discoveries given the characterisation of the lack of empirical defeasibility of the strongly a priori here. **Giacomo** recalls the other clause of Field's characterization of apriority that the justification is independent of experience (before we even consider the defeating profile of the proposition in question). But the reasons to believe that water is H₂O clearly come from experience, so "water is H₂O" won't be a priori.

Section 3

- **Josh** wondered why shall we think that there is anything like the strongly a priority at all? Aren't all warrants obviously empirically defeasible? **Giacomo** replied that if we interpret the earlier restriction that rules out cases of indirect empirical defeat as ruling out cases of pure empirical overriding, then strong apriority is not implausible. Pure overriding defeaters are those that suggest that the previously warranted P is false, *without questioning the good standing of your earlier warrant for P*. A priori warrants would be immune from them because, given the (supposedly) conclusive nature of a priori warrants, every time one gets

an overriding defeater, one thereby gets also a reason to think that she might have made some mistake, or that one's previous warrant was not in good standing anyway. In other words, we might be able to rule out brute errors in the a priori case. **Crispin** commented that even so, there are some problematic cases, like Church's Thesis (the thesis that every effectively computable function is general recursive). Since the notion of effective computability remains intuitive, Church's thesis is not provable, and it is accepted because none has found a counterexample to it so far. Suppose that someone provides you with a counterexample: that would be evidence that you committed a brute error, in the sense that you got it wrong, but did nothing wrong—your abductive grounds to accept Church's thesis were perfectly good. In other words, the a priori warrant supporting Church's thesis does not seem to be conclusive. **Giacomo** notes that we will have to admit that there are different kinds of a priori warrants, and those that are abductive won't have the immunity from pure overriding defeaters.

- **Xintong** asked Crispin – do you think the principle of simplicity can be revised on empirical grounds? **Crispin** replied that we need a better characterisation of what simplicity is. Field's example is not very clear.
- **Sam** suggested that the physical geometry case gives us an example where given some empirical evidence against physical geometry would move, as it were, from the realm of the weakly a priori to the strongly. Empirical evidence has defeated our non-empirical reasons to think that space is Euclidean (hence those reasons were only weakly a priori), but it has left untouched the good standing of Euclidean geometry as a mathematical theory (which is plausibly strongly a priori warranted).
- **Peter** suggested that he is not sure why logic is treated differently from mathematics in the paper. **Crispin** responded that in the case of real numbers, the lack of applicability argument says that "there are no Real quantities in the world". What would the equivalent be for logic? **Peter** further replied that we tend to think of logic as schematically formed and we fill in the variables. The generalisations that one constructs in arithmetic seem to provide their own variables. **Crispin** suggested that this seems like a good distinction, but that might not cut cleanly across all of mathematics and logic. This is similar to our discussion a few weeks ago regarding representation theorems and structuralism. **Peter** commented that it seems natural to think that in the case of logic there would be a role to play for instantiation on logical schema that would suggest there is no need for a representation theorem.

Section 4 (The Benacerraf problem)

- **Giovanni** wondered about the full-blooded Platonism solution. Why being bound to be right is enough to solve the dilemma? Does that give us the notion of reliability we need? **Crispin** suggested that the view requires the principle that the possibility of the model is sufficient for its truth. **Crispin and Carrie** suggest that that seems both semantically problematic and not capable of delivering the interesting epistemic relation between our mathematical beliefs and the mathematical facts. **Crispin** suggested further that the original worry was a disconnection between one's beliefs and mathematical reality, and merely saying 'your beliefs are bound to be true' doesn't re-establish the connection.
- **Carrie** wondered why Field thinks there's a disanalogy here such that in the logical case we might appeal to evolution to explain our reliability in forming logical beliefs but not in the mathematical case? Presumably, people who get $2+2$ wrong would have struggled in getting past natural selection just like people who is poor at logic. **Peter** suggested that Field aims to

cast doubt on the claim that “awareness of whatever is the right arithmetic is survival conducive” not the claim that “awareness of $2+2=4$ is survival conducive”. **Carrie** responded that this might boil down to a no miracles type argument; if our scientific theories were by and large not accurate, it would be a miracle that they are successful. Likewise for our basic arithmetic. **Crispin** suggested that all this will require reasoning – as long as we have the right logic, we can reason. That might be what, for Field, sets logic apart from mathematics and empirical methodology. **Peter** pointed out that we can (it seems) make some sense of a world without numbers, but this is not the case for basic logic. **Crispin** suggested that there is something worrying here – this suggests that for any situation, we should only use the tools in that situation to reason about it, which seems illicit.

The issue is whether we can reason about what alternative logics would be, and if so, what logic should we use in doing so (the one that obtains in the counterfactual situation or the one we commonly use in the actual scenarios?). Field isn't clear in setting up the issue.