

Notes for summing up: Three issues on the a priori

1. The problem of characterization

Main issue: clarify what “independence of experience” means exactly. Two broad ways of addressing the question:

(i) Accept Williamson’s and Hawthorne’s understanding of apriority as a putative property of ways of knowing/forming justified belief, and try to individuate belief-forming processes in which experience may be said to play a role that contributes to justified belief only in an enabling way.

(ii) Take apriority to be a property of epistemic grounds—or propositions associated to grounds—and explain how some grounds are independent of experience.

The problem with taking the first path is that once we focus on belief-forming processes the distinction between evidential and enabling roles of experience—and more broadly, the difference between factors that play an enabling role and factors that play an evidential role—quickly becomes blurred.

It may thus seem a good idea to insist that the a priori/a posteriori status applies primarily to *grounds* for believing a proposition, and suggest that talk of a priori/a posteriori *beliefs* only is derivative: a priori/a posteriori beliefs are those that are based on a priori/a posteriori grounds. If we take this approach, the way in which the agent forms a belief does not matter with respect to the a priori status of what she is warranted to believe; indeed, it does not even matter whether the agent forms the belief at all. This is one of the suggestions on which we have often expressed a good deal of sympathy.

Yet, is it enough to defuse the challenge posed by philosophers who would like us to focus on belief-forming processes and doxastic justification? One concern arises from the consideration that the grounds for believing a proposition have to be acquired themselves, at least in a wide range of cases. And arguably, it’s the role played by experience in the acquisition of those grounds that matters for the a priori/a posteriori status of a proposition. Thus, if we say that a proposition is a priori when one can in principle acquire the grounds for believing it without relying on experience, we have to explain what that means exactly. Otherwise we risk simply pushing the problem back: instead of having to account for the role of experience in belief-formation, we would have to account for the role of experience in ground-acquisition. Some options:

1) Ichikawa and Jarvis. A priori grounds are not really acquired; they are already possessed by epistemic agents in virtue of the relations of rational necessity holding between propositions of the a priori realm. Question: can this approach account for a priori cognitive achievements?

2) Carrie. A priori propositions are empirically grounded (they are grounded in the concepts that one acquires empirically), and yet that grounding does not play an evidential, or justificatory role. The justificatory role is instead played by the agent’s reflection on the concepts. Question: isn’t this to concede too much to the opponent of the a priori?

3) Try to account for the acquisition of grounds in ways that are independent of experience; perhaps developing the suggestion that some reasons for belief may in principle be acquired purely by thinking, or imagining (e.g. from the sensory isolation tank, in a state of amnesia, or

through some hallucinations). Question: how to demarcate exactly the difference between inner experience compatible with apriority and experience that is not compatible with apriority?

4) Crispin. A priori justification not as non-experiential but as *supra-experiential*. What is intuitively characteristic of a great range of core bottom-up cases is the role played by the intellect *on top of* experience: we should be thinking about modes of justification that, if experiential, are *more than experiential*, where experience may play a role – even an indispensable role — in the accomplishment of the justification, but where it cannot take one all the way, and an extra intellectual feat is needed.

In any case, the general sense is that the relationship between grounds for belief and actual/potential belief-formation has not been properly understood yet. The readings we did last term on the nature of inference offered an overview on the varieties of options in characterizing epistemic grounds, basing relation, and epistemic transitions in thought. In short, one difficulty in developing a theory of a priori grounds is that we seem to lack a theory of epistemic grounds in general.

2. The problem of existence

Link with the problem of characterization: if we can't provide a stable characterization of a priori warrants, how can we be confident that there are any a priori warranted beliefs? One might wonder whether radical empiricists may be right after all.

We discussed a number of critiques to radical empiricism: Bonjour, Wright, Boghossian, Jenkins, Kripke's adoption problem. We individuated many problems for the view, such as the failure to account for the phenomenology of putative a priori judgments, internal tensions, the possibility of leading to infinite regress in episodes of belief-revision, ...

3. The problem of relevance

A satisfactory solution to the problems of characterization and existence would also have to reclaim a unique role for a priori warrants in epistemology. A stable distinction between enabling and warranting role of experience which permits the classifications of some warranted beliefs as independent of experience and others as experiential, but which had the consequence that the epistemic profiles of the two types of warrants were symmetric—say, with respect to epistemic security and the role they play in inquiry—would fail to vindicate the traditional significance of a priori warrants.

One worry to put the problem is the following. If, as many acknowledge (e.g. Kripke 1980, Kitcher 1983, Casullo 2003, Williamson 2013), a proposition that can be known a priori can also be known a posteriori, what's the special contribution of a priori warrants to knowledge?

Options

A. Capitulation: the a priori/a posteriori distinction is indeed of little theoretical significance. Not only allegedly a priori and allegedly a posteriori beliefs are formed pretty much in the same way, but they also equally defeasible. (Williamson & co.)

B. Hard-line resistance: a priori propositional warrants are indefeasible (Ichikawa and Jarvis, Smithies).

C. Middle way 1: there are some defeaters that can affect empirical warrants but not a priori warrants (e.g. pure overrides or brute errors).

D. Middle way 2: a priori warrants are defeasible just like empirical warrants, but not all a priori truths are knowable by *direct/canonical* empirical means. That is, some a priori truths (basic logic?) are knowable only via *direct/canonical* a priori means or via *indirect* empirical means such as testimony and memory.

E. Cases where one seems to come to believe an a priori truth by purely empirical means (e.g. “3+4=7” by counting objects) are misleading: the generality of the proposition involved goes beyond what experience can deliver. If so, the role of a priori warrants may be to—when things go well—give us access to general and rationally necessary truths that would be off limits if we restricted ourselves to empirical means.

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Presenting: Giacomo

Topic: Brainstorming/Summing up

The Problem of Characterisation

Indrek wondered if there was any usefulness in appealing to brute error in characterising the a priori – are a priori warrants immune to brute error? If experience is something that is susceptible to brute error then we have a way to characterise independence from experience.

Crispin wondered what it means for a priority to be a property of grounds – If your evidence for p is a posteriori, and p entails q then you have an a posteriori grounded proposition which is generated through an a priori entailment. If what it takes to have the grounds is essential to the second account, can we actually hold positions 1 and 2 distinct?

Xintong suggested we can distinguish three different things: How we respond to grounds, what grounds there are, and how we might come to have grounds.

Crispin wondered what the support relations in e.g. Ichikawa and Jarvis’ view are supposed to be – are they entailments or something less than entailments. If they are entailments we have lost the notion as entailments are a modal not an epistemic notion.

Indrek wondered whether on these sort of views a posteriori knowledge would be knowledge I can’t have without ‘looking around’, and independence of experience has to be cashed out in terms of what can’t be observed, not what hasn’t been observed (what I haven’t looked around at). If so, this is another way the two paths diverge. What we care about here is the limits of what is able to be experienced.

Giacomo asked whether on Crispin’s proposal if what plays the justificatory role of a priori knowledge can be in part empirical. **Crispin** suggested that yes, this is fine. There is some sense in which independence of experience is misleading – it is hard to get a grip on what it is for something to be ‘independent of experience’. That said, we can in some cases see where a generalisation that all cubes have 12 edges for example is ‘independent’ of the experience of the figure of a cube.

Peter wondered that if you think it is experiential then a generalisation step, what sort of generalisation do you get? It seems like an achievement for example to go beyond ‘cubes have 12 edges’ to ‘trapezoidal prisms have 12 edges’.

Sonia wondered what it is that differentiates the notion of a prototype of a cube generalised to a prototype of ‘who’s who’ which is not generalisable in the same way. **Giacomo** wondered whether there is some ability there to recognise the generalisable features.

Giacomo suggested that the suggestion that **Crispin** puts forward is a good way of engaging with the problem of relevance. There is an insight to be had in some processes which goes far beyond the experience of the process, and this does not seem to be an inductive generalisation.

Crispin suggested that very often when you apply a priori reasoning methods, you do things quicker than you would otherwise. Although this is a pragmatic notion, this seems like an important part of a priori reasoning. Further **Crispin** suggested that without some sorts of a priori reasoning, we lose a grip on how to falsify some statements that could be apparently verified empirically, some background theory which cannot be verified empirically (which would require empirical data) to constrain the empirical statements. The a priori seems to play this role. Something arbitrates experience.

Crispin suggested three directions: the pragmatic concern. Maybe the a priori reaches further than the empirical, and some sort of transcendental story like the above where the a priori constrains the empirical. **Peter** suggested the difficulty with the last is moving from the general thought that ‘something must referee’ to ‘this thing is the referee’