

Understanding and the A Priori

Emmy Noether Junior Research Group Proposal

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1 State of the art

A very traditional and attractive picture of a priori knowledge sees close connections between apriority, necessity and grasp of meaning. According to this picture, sense experience is only needed to acquaint us with contingent facts about what the actual world is like. A priori knowledge, which does not depend on sense experience, reveals necessary truths that hold no matter what the actual world is like; the investigation of necessity is thus an a priori matter. Moreover, a central class of the truths that are knowable a priori are made true purely by virtue of their meaning, and we are able to know such truths just by grasping their meaning. So grasp of meaning helps explain how a priori knowledge is possible. For example, “If Smith knows that snow is white, then Smith is justified in believing that snow is white” is intuitively a necessary truth, and it seems to be knowable by anyone who understands the meaning of “knows”. The traditional picture thus links apriority with understanding, on the one hand, and with necessity, on the other.

This picture was common ground even between the logical positivists and rationalists like Gottlob Frege, though only the former thought that *all* a priori knowledge could be explained by grasp of meaning. But the picture faced at least two fundamental challenges in the second half of the twentieth century. The first challenge came from W.V.O. Quine’s attack on the analytic/synthetic distinction (Quine 1951, 1960, 1966). Quine argued that there is no coherent sense to be made of the idea of truth in virtue of meaning. Even more radically, Quine argued that the meaning of a statement imposes no constraints on what could, in principle, count as evidence for or against it. Quine’s challenge thus threatened the viability of any attempt to account for a priori knowledge in terms of grasp of meaning.

The second fundamental challenge came from Saul Kripke’s argument that there are necessary truths that are only knowable a posteriori (Kripke 1980). Kripke argued that the range of possibilities for what the world could have been like is constrained by how the world actually turns out. For example, the fact that the substance with the superficial features by which we identify gold turns out to be the element with atomic number 79 implies, according to Kripke, that it is a necessary truth that gold has atomic number 79. But this is something that can only be discovered by empirical investigation, and so Kripke’s argument shows that some necessary truths are only knowable a posteriori, contrary to the traditional picture. Kripke’s challenge thus broke the link between apriority and modality. Together, the two challenges conspired to undermine the traditional

picture, and helped remove the theory of the a priori from its central position in analytic philosophy.

In recent years, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in the a priori, and there are now several contemporary proponents of the existence of a priori knowledge. Broadly speaking, the proponents divide into two groups. Philosophers in the first group, whom we might call *pure rationalists*, posit a special faculty of intuition, and argue that the deliverances of this faculty can provide a priori knowledge. One instance of the pure rationalist strategy is provided by George Bealer, who posits the existence of a priori intuitions, characterized as non-sensory conscious mental episodes or “intellectual seemings” (Bealer 1996, 2002). According to Bealer, intuitions in his sense are reliably correlated with the truth and hence can provide a priori justification for beliefs. Ernest Sosa likewise defends the justificatory power of intuitions, and Laurence Bonjour posits the existence of irreducible “rational insight” that is capable of grounding a priori knowledge (Bonjour 1998, Sosa 1999).

Philosophers in the second group are what we might call *neo-Fregeans*. They start by articulating a conception of meaning according to which the meaning of an expression (or the identity of a concept) is determined by its inferential role. They then draw connections between meaning, so characterized, and the a priori. For example, according to Christopher Peacocke’s theory of concepts, the identity of a concept is determined by its participation in certain valid inferences, and for a subject to understand the concept is for her to find those inferences primitively compelling (Peacocke 1992, 1998a). For Peacocke this forms the basis for an account of a priori knowledge (Peacocke 1998b, 2004). Similarly, Paul Boghossian argues that reasoning according to certain basic inference patterns is constitutive of understanding the logical constants, and that this gives us a kind of default epistemic entitlement that can help ground our a priori knowledge of logic (Boghossian 1996, 2003a, b).¹

Both pure rationalism and neo-Fregeanism are potentially fruitful approaches to the a priori. But both approaches raise fundamental questions about the relationship between apriority and understanding. For pure rationalists, the primary questions concern the relationship between understanding the statement ‘*p*’ (or grasping the thought that *p*) and having the intuition that *p*. Any satisfactory account needs a way to distinguish between the a priori intuition that *p* and other cases in which it seems that *p* or one is inclined to believe *p* (e.g. because of one’s sense experience or subconscious biases) (Grundmann 2007). Pure rationalists tend to concur with Sosa’s suggestion that the intuitions relevant for the a priori are those that are based solely on understanding. But these views

¹ The neo-Fregean approach developed by David Chalmers posits a more direct connection between meaning and the a priori: on his view, the inferences that determine the meaning of an expression just are the ones involving it that are justified a priori (Chalmers 2002, 2004). Full understanding of the meaning of an expression thus brings with it all of the a priori knowledge associated with the expression, but it cannot explain that knowledge.

raise a host of questions. What is the relationship between the faculty of intuition and understanding? How can understanding a statement, or grasping a thought, provide the basis for an intellectual seeming or an inclination to believe? What are the cognitive capacities involved in understanding that might provide such a basis? And do the intuitions generated by these capacities plausibly count as a non-experiential source of justification? A fully developed pure rationalist account of the a priori should have answers to these questions.

The questions about understanding that neo-Fregeans face are rather different. Unlike pure rationalists, paradigmatic neo-Fregeans like Peacocke and Boghossian explicitly ground a priori knowledge in understanding from the start. But these accounts rely on the very strong assumption that understanding a concept C requires a subject to be aware of, and reason according to, C's inferential role. Neo-Fregeans are thus vulnerable to the charge that their conception of understanding is too demanding. For example, Jerry Fodor argues against neo-Fregeanism on the basis of atomism about understanding, according to which one can possess a given concept independently of whether one possesses any other concepts (Fodor 1998, 2004). Similarly, Timothy Williamson endorses a radically externalist account of understanding, according to which understanding a language requires nothing more than sufficient causal interaction with a community of speakers. This conception of understanding forms the basis of his attack on neo-Fregean attempts to account for the a priori (Williamson 2006, 2007). If the neo-Fregean approach to the a priori is to be viable, it needs to defend its conception of understanding against less-demanding rivals such as these.

If such a defense is to advance beyond bare stipulation and the trading of intuitions about particular cases, then we need to find independent ways to ground the notion of understanding. We need to step back and consider the various roles the notion of understanding is called on to play in philosophy, and in related areas such as linguistics and cognitive psychology. What explanatory work do we need understanding to do, and what kinds of constraints does this place on what understanding must be like? Only once we have articulated an independently well-motivated conception of understanding in this way can we determine whether understanding has a role to play in the epistemology of the a priori.

There are several areas in which we can look to start developing such a conception. The first area is the epistemology of testimony. Intuitively, there is a very close connection between testimony and understanding: a hearer can only acquire knowledge by testimony from speakers she understands. What light can this fact shed on the nature of understanding? According to *reductionists*, the justification provided by testimony ultimately reduces to the justification provided by other more basic sources such as perception and induction (Lackey and Sosa 2006). Alternatively, *anti-reductionists* treat testimony as an epistemically basic source of knowledge (Burge 199?). Both sides simply presuppose

understanding of what has been said rather than explaining the role it plays in acquiring knowledge by testimony. Does it play a merely causal role (Schiffer 1987)? Is it a further basic source of justification, or is it somehow involved in the justification provided by, e.g. perception (Fricker 2003)? Investigating the epistemology of testimony is one way to gain independent insight into the nature of understanding.

The second area is the study of what linguists call *linguistic competence* – roughly, a speaker's ability to recognize acceptable and defective expressions of her language, to detect ambiguities, to appreciate entailment relations, and so on. Linguists in the Chomskyan tradition articulate linguistic principles to account for these sorts of facts, and they tend to explain linguistic competence by supposing that speakers have so-called "tacit knowledge" of these principles. Philosophers sometimes resist the suggestion that speakers genuinely count as *knowing* or even believing the principles of linguistic theory (Evans 1996). But even if this objection is granted, there remain substantial questions about what sort of cognitive access to linguistic principles we must attribute to speakers in order to explain their competence (see, for example, the essays in Part One of Barber 2003). Since linguistic competence is clearly at least a crucial part of understanding, we can expect conclusions about the former to have implications for the latter. For example, a growing body of research suggests that competence requires speakers to be sensitive to subtle distinctions between the different kinds of roles that persons and objects can play in events of different types, as well as distinctions between events, states and processes (Larson 1988, Levin and Rappaport Hovav 2005 and Parsons 1990). Are these results compatible with minimal conceptions of understanding like Fodor's and Williamson's? What can they tell us about the viability of the more demanding neo-Fregean conception? Can linguistic competence provide a basis for a priori knowledge?

The final area concerns what we might call the phenomenology of understanding. Galen Strawson posits the existence of *understanding-experiences* that accompany the conscious entertaining of a thought, or the hearing of a sentence that one understands (Strawson 1994). The relationship between understanding-experience and speech perception again raises questions about the relationship between language understanding and perception (Fricker 2003, Pettit 2002, 2005). Moreover, some have developed Strawson's idea into the view that there is a distinctive phenomenology to entertaining the thought that *p*, one that this is distinct from the phenomenology of entertaining the distinct thought that *q* (Horgan and Tienson 2002, Pitt 2004). What, then, is the relationship between understanding and phenomenology? What can investigating the phenomenology of understanding-experience tell us about the nature of understanding?

The topic of understanding concerns questions in epistemology, philosophy of language and philosophy of mind. Moreover, it is a topic for which philosophical work can benefit from empirical input, especially from linguistics and cognitive

psychology. The three suggested areas provide exactly these crucial perspectives on the study of understanding: the epistemology of testimony (epistemology), linguistic competence (philosophy of language and linguistics), the phenomenology of understanding (philosophy of mind and cognitive psychology). Bringing work in these areas together is a novel way of approaching the theory of understanding, and it promises to lead to a theory that is more comprehensive than anything that is currently available.

Such a theory of understanding is crucial for assessing the prospects of an understanding-based account of a priori knowledge. But by itself it does not answer the question of whether an understanding-based account is a *complete* account of the a priori. Were the positivists right to believe that all our a priori knowledge can be explained in terms of grasp of meaning? Or was Frege right to that it plays a non-exhaustive role? This is a question about which most contemporary proponents of the a priori do not have much to say; their primary goal is merely to show how a priori knowledge is possible at all. To answer it we need a systematic investigation into the methods that philosophers actually use to arrive at a priori knowledge, methods such as conceptual analysis and the use of thought experiments. If we know how these methods function, we will grasp better which cognitive capacities are required to employ them successfully. If these capacities are all constitutive of understanding, then understanding can in principle provide a complete account of the a priori. If some of these capacities go significantly beyond understanding, then the role of understanding in explaining a priori knowledge will be non-exhaustive. In the second case we will need to systematically distinguish understanding-based a priori knowledge from other types of a priori knowledge.

Given this approach to understanding and the a priori, what becomes of the traditional view that all necessary truths are a priori? The contemporary consensus is that Kripke has shown that this is false. But some still maintain that necessity is fundamentally a priori, in the sense that all necessary truths are conceptually implied by, or are a priori deducible from ordinary contingent truths (Jackson 1998, Chalmers and Jackson 2001). Articulating the nature of understanding, and investigating the operation of a priori methods, can give us tools that will help evaluate this thesis. But we will also need to have a positive conception of the nature of metaphysical modality that makes clear its relation to our conceptual and epistemic capacities. Only then will we be able to assess how much of the traditional picture of the relationship between the a priori, necessity and grasp of meaning survives into the twenty-first century.

2 Goals

The fundamental working hypothesis of the group is that there is something worth preserving about the traditional picture of the a priori sketched in Section 1 – that there is an important relationship between the nature of understanding, our capacity for a priori knowledge, and the realm of necessary truths. Elucidating

this picture is crucial for articulating a conception of philosophy itself as an independent discipline with a distinctive, a priori methodology. The main research goals of the group are motivated by this working hypothesis.

Our first main goal is to develop a systematic, well-grounded theory of the nature of understanding. We think the best way to reach this goal is by bringing together philosophical and empirical work in areas of research in which understanding plays an explanatory role. We therefore have several subsidiary goals: to arrive at a detailed account of the role understanding plays in the epistemology of testimony, to describe the relationship between understanding and linguistic competence, and to investigate the phenomenological aspects of understanding.

Our second main goal is to develop a detailed account of the function and epistemic value of paradigmatic a priori methods. More specifically, we aim to determine the extent to which such methods rely only on understanding, as we conceive it. We also intend to identify ways in which epistemically fruitful a priori methods might rely on cognitive capacities that go beyond what is required for understanding. Our goal is to determine the scope and limits of the understanding-based a priori.

Our third main goal is to support the view that necessary truths are fundamentally a priori, by showing that all necessary truths can be determined a priori on the basis of contingent truths. In support of this goal, we aim to develop an account of metaphysical modality that helps explain how knowledge of contingent truths can provide a priori access to modal truths. Our goal is to articulate a conception of metaphysical modality that shows why the modal realm is open to investigation by the use of understanding-based and other a priori methods.