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Introduction. In this paper I will explore the idea of *a priori* knowledge. This essay will be broken into three main parts. First, I will consider the definition of the term '*a priori* knowledge'. Second I will explicate some critiques of *a priori* knowledge focusing on Quine's "Epistemology Naturalized". In the last portion of this paper I will discuss whether I accept *a priori* knowledge or whether I reject it.

§1. To begin an enquiry of *a priori* knowledge one must first define the term to avoid any linguistic misunderstandings. I will offer two definitions of *a priori* knowledge which will be used throughout the paper. The first definition will be referred to as the hard definition.

The hard definition of *a priori* knowledge entails that one can come about knowledge by reasoning alone. On this definition, *a priori* knowledge does not rely on sensory perceptions. An example of this sort of knowledge can be found in Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, or "I think therefore I am." The very utterance of "I" in this case asserts a self-awareness, or intuitive notion of one's existence. According to the *cogito*, one can arrive at knowledge of one's own existence through reason alone. Even if it were the case that the "I" were to be deceived in this case, to be deceived is to exist, therefore the knowledge of one's own existence would be the same.

One worry that arises immediately with this version of *a priori* knowledge is that to have self-awareness is to perceive oneself in some sense. How in fact can one perceive oneself without sensory perception? Or more specifically, how can one perceive oneself truly alone, and without any sense perceptions occurring? From outside of the perceivable world?

Is it possible to come to any knowledge by reason alone while not having any sense perceptions? Even the use of language to denote one's self holds a deep connection to things perceivable. There are no instances of language that are meaningful and can render a true proposition which do not denote things or instances that exist in the world. This is not to say that talking of things which do not denote real things or instances in the world renders nonsensical babble, but that considering words that do not denote something in the world cannot yield a true statement.

For example, this is not to say that one cannot talk about a flying pig. The very notion of a flying pig comes from sense perceptions of many flying things (*i.e.* birds, planes, hot air balloons). One can abstract the notion of flying and attach it fictitiously to the word pig, which denotes the class of animals that are a pinkish color, like to roll in the mud, and can eat just about anything. Therefore, to be able to assert consciousness of one's own existence is to use a language that was created to denote empirical things in the physical external world even if it is oneself as in this empirical world.

This is not to assert that the use of this language created to denote things in the empirical world entails that all uses of that language must refer to be *meaningful*. However, as considered above, to assert something about a flying pig, is nevertheless *meaningful* however, it either lacks a truth value or is plainly false. Because language is created from denoting empirical objects in the world, anything expressed through this language is known through sense experience. If this is the case, it then follows that a flying pig, is a combination of things experienced. If one has experienced pigs in the empirical world, and one has also experienced flying objects in the world then they can combine these now abstractable objects to render a fantastical flying pig.

No one comes to understand the term “I” without learning it in relation to other things sense perceivable and abstracting from those things that are separate from the “I” and sense perceivable in the world. The very language itself used to denote the “I” in a statement such as “I exist” is taught to the person using the term by other people and in relation to other things in the world, which are never learned by reason alone.

The very notion of indexicals challenges the idea that “I exist” can be inferred by reason alone. How can one understand that when Jennifer Faust says, “I exist” that it is wholly different than myself making the same assertion? The function of indexicals is that they switch referent with each use. If I were to say, “I had a delicious sandwich for lunch at the café today.” Making the same statement tomorrow would refer to a different instance altogether. I would have to modify the original statement to another indexical such as, “I had a delicious sandwich for lunch at the café yesterday.” Furthermore, if someone were to hear of my sandwich eating experience and in wanting to influence her lunch date to desire a sandwich from the same café she would have to change the indexical use once again from my original uttering of, “I had a delicious sandwich for lunch at the café yesterday” to, “a colleague of mine had a delicious sandwich for lunch at the café yesterday.” For one to use an indexical, there must be some prior understanding of the function however primitive.

Language is a tool used for people to communicate to each other. It is a relational tool between objects and instances in the world, and the people perceiving them. The very thought or utterance of “I” picks out an object in the world and separates this object from the rest of the things in the world. Even if everything in the world is to be doubted one can still assert that there are perceptions happening. Regardless of my place in existence, perceptions are occurring. The “I” is not known as separate from these perceptions but as necessarily connected to the

perceptions. The "I" does not see itself as in-the-world but it sees the world as perceived. In the Cartesian sense of the "I" existing as known to myself without the involvement of sense perception, there is no "I". How can one argue to know the "I" as independent from the perceptions occurring?

These numbers, words, and sense experiences have no real existence other than as abstract objects that denote. That is to say numbers, words, and sense experiences are relational abstract objects that assist the mind in picking out objects and instances in the world. Denoting is the act of picking out a specific object or instance. To denote something is for the mind to pick out the denotation (object) as separate and distinct from other things. It is evident that there is an undeniably strong connection between language and the objects in the world that are only known through sense perception. Language itself is learned through denoting, as when a child learns to point and say, "dhat dhat dhat" which soon morphs into the saying of "doggie" until the child ultimately communicates coherently to other people, "there is a dog over there."

This being the case, *a priori* knowledge in this hard definition cannot be possible. *A priori* knowledge may exist in this case but only if it is unspeakable (incommunicable in any way) and possibly unknowable on a conscious level. If the reader is still in question of the possibility of *a priori* knowledge under the scope of the hard definition then she should attempt reasoning without language or sense perception.

The very learning of language and the concepts that allows one to abstract and denote requires sensory perception because language learning itself requires sense perception to make the language world connection. Furthermore, given that the learning of language and concepts requires sense perception, the truth of any proposition requires some original sense perception.

Therefore, the coming to knowledge of any proposition requires some level of sense perception and not reason alone.

There can be instances where one comes to knowledge by reason alone when they have already obtained some knowledge of the world but in the hard definition given, this previous sense perception would not be considered. For the hard definition there is no original sense perception to derive any abstractions from the empirical world, as it is taken, *reason alone* is without any sense perception at any level. Under this notion of *a priori* knowledge I cannot see how one could consider *a priori* knowledge possible, or even meaningful.

The hard definition of *a priori* knowledge may trivialize *a priority* unduly or miss the point altogether in the narrow picture it creates. The second definition of *a priori* knowledge that I will put forth is a softer version of the hard definition above. In the soft definition, previous language understanding and sense perceptions will now be allowed within the definition of *a priority* to give us background information (*i.e.* ways of perceiving and communicating previously to the current attempt at *a priori* knowledge. Above, no sense perception was admitted into the idea of *a priori* knowledge. This is to say that there is no language use, and no sense experience permitted into *a priori* knowledge. *A priori* knowledge was something attained by reason alone without <u>any</u> prior sense perceptions as criteria for knowledge.

As stated above, in the soft definition, previous sense perceptions and the use of language will be admitted into the structure of *a priori* knowledge. We can now assume that one can use the language, which has been created from previous sense perceptions and experiences which happened before the instance in question. This means one can come to knowledge of the universal concept of the color green through the knowledge of many green things perceived before, through reason alone. Through the knowing of many particular instances of green, one

can abstract the color green as universal concepts from these particular things which have the attribute of being green.

Whereas before we attempted to start without language use or prior sensory perceptions, in this case we will assume that the subject has all of her faculties of perception intact and that she is also a competent language user. I will put forth examples of *a priori* cases in this definition. At the same time I will compare these examples with the hard definition for further clarification.

The subject will now, contrary to the hard definition, be able to understand the concept of green which relies on previous sensory data. The subject can also understand the concept of hat from previous sense data which will ultimately enable her to abstract the notion of a green hat without further sense data. As a result, she will be able to come to know things which are green and also a hat by reason alone (*a priori*).

Within the soft definition we can know *a priori* the statement, "this is a green hat" because we have language constructed from the experience of many particulars to denote a universal. For the person that wishes to hold up the hard definition, one could not experience many 'hat' things enabling them to abstract the property of 'hatness' from the object beforehand. Likewise, one cannot experience many 'green' things previously enabling them to abstract the property of 'greenness' *a priori* under the hard definition.

For the person upholding the soft definition, this abstraction can be made, and as a result she can know things to be 'green' merely by conceptualizing 'green' as an attribute of things after having experienced other things which have the property of 'greenness' in them and then from abstracting 'greenness' from the objects. After knowing many 'green' things and abstracting 'green' from these things, the person upholding the soft definition can know 'green'

things *a priori*, or without further experience and through reason alone. We must first have sense experience of things with 'greenness' and things with 'hatness'. We must also have the language to denote 'greenness' or 'hatness' as an attribute of an object. This type of *a priori* knowledge is situational and cannot be said to be known by reason alone by the hard definition because of the reliance on previous sense perceptions however, within the soft definition this type of *a priori* knowledge may be attainable.

One problem here can be considered from an earlier example of flying pigs. Within the soft definition one can abstract from many particular flying things the property of 'being able to fly'. Also from experiencing many pigs, one can abstract the concept of 'pigness'. Within the soft definition given above the subject can come to have knowledge of a 'flying pig' simply by taking these two universal concepts and combining them through reason alone.

Furthermore, considering the idea stated above, that there must be a denotation to be true, there has to be a thing that exists which is denoted and there is no such thing as a flying pig. This brings up problems of the verifiability of *a priori* knowledge, for how does one test this knowledge? The person who comes to something considered *a priori* knowledge must now go back into the world and test their hypothesis empirically. This seems problematic for the person arguing against science as a paradigm of our knowledge. One may come up with many things that are considered *a priori* knowledge in this way yet, for it to be true justified belief, one must verify the reality of a flying pig to come to true justified belief.

§2. I have given considerable attention to the hard view above, however it seems to be the soft view that Quine rejects in his essay *Epistemology Naturalized*. Quine's treatment of the soft view will be the focus of this section of the paper. Quine assumes that the knower has previous

knowledge of language, previous sense experiences, and that one can communicate these experiences through language [1]. Quine sees science as the paradigm of knowledge [2]. Meaning becomes its empirical content [3]. This is to say, meaning becomes its verifiability in the empirical world through experience. Assertions must be empirically justifiable to be considered true justified belief [4]. Knowledge in the Cartesian sense of Infalliblistic and absolute does not exist for Quine. We are fallibilist [5]. The empirical nature of our knowledge is not absolute and epistemology in the absolute sense is not possible. Quine believes that epistemology must either be thrown out or reduced to psychology (*fn*.4). Theory of knowledge becomes *naturalized* and is based on psychological states and empirical observations[6]. Meaning adopts a behaviorist theory of language.

Human knowledge is, essentially, our science. The evidence for science is sensory input stated in observation statements[7]. The aim of epistemology is to understand the link between evidence and theory. This aim cannot be met by foundationalist reductions, which fail to account for the holistic character of theories. Therefore, the aim of epistemology is best served

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[1] *Epistemology Naturalized* p.81 second full paragraph.

[2] *Ibid.* p.83. There are many other quotes from this essay where Quine asserts this point. For reference, a couple of significant others are on p.78 and p.84 which also assert this concept. I do not consider Quine to be arguing against this thesis but rather, he is simply accepting science as the paradigm of knowledge and replacing theory of knowledge itself outside of philosophy and within the scope of psychology (see *Epistemology Naturalized* p.75 last paragraph and ff.).

[3] *Ibid*. p.79. Considering fn.1, "whatever evidence there *is* for science *is* sensory evidence." And, "all inculcation of meanings of words must rest ultimately on sensory evidence." (*ibid* p.75). (italics Quine's).

[4] *Ibid.* p.71 "natural knowledge is to be based somehow on sense experience" and "justifying our knowledge of truths of nature in sensory terms." Most of the explication of Quine will be an attempt at indirectly unpacking the idea that true justified belief can only come from empirical verifiability.

[5] I take this interpretation to hold onto the thesis of science as a paradigm of knowledge. There are instances in science where people have constructed full-bodied theories that are later to be proven false. One example is the atom. The original definition, that which cannot be divided. Then we divided it with our modern technology. Do we need a new definition? Or a new term?

[6] *Ibid* end of p.75 through p.76 and 82 second full paragraph.

[7] *Ibid* p.75 first full paragraph.

by the empirical study of the relation between our sensory input and our theoretical output (science).[8]

The final question to be asked in this explication of Quine is, can there be *a priori* knowledge? The answer is already partially given above. If human knowledge is, essentially our science, the reduction of epistemology has been made to psychological states. Because our language is necessarily connected between sense perception and the denoting of objects (and phenomena) in the world, it follows that psychological states give us knowledge based upon sense data. "Whatever evidence there *is* for science *is* sensory evidence", "all inculcation of meaning of words must rest ultimately on sensory evidence" (*Epistemology Naturalized* p.75).

It further follows that, the evidence for science is sensory input, which is then stated in observation statements. Our knowledge comes from our relationship in the world and in relation to the world around us. Our in-the-world abstractions separate the self from the world but our self is still in the world perceiving the phenomena happening to it. As empirical beings we cannot separate our in-the-world from the world. Reason alone cannot guide us outside of this necessary connection. Even if we come to know something in some sense by reason alone the very concepts used to deduce this 'something' are empirically based and need empirical justification to be considered knowledge proper.

Quine considers the aim of epistemology to be the understanding of the link between evidence and theory. At one level, evidence itself is empirical, and cannot be otherwise. I cannot conceive of any instance where evidence does not have empirical properties or which are not derived from empirically based concepts. Even to conceive of one's own consciousness is to conceive of oneself separate from the world in the world, and able to conceptualize this notion through language or other modes of thinking which are empirically based and constructed

[8] This paragraph and the following paragraphs were taken from professor Faust's lecture 11.12.2002.

through or, originating from, real world experiences. Even science fiction fantasies are empirically based under this conception in that they rely on the combining of real world objects and instances in a fictionalized manner.

If one is to argue for mathematical reasoning as a paradigm of *a priori* knowledge, it seems problematic that they can come to knowledge of a right triangle when a right triangle may never exist in-the-world. One must go into the world and empirically verify the existence and the possibility of a right triangle before true justified belief of right triangles can be asserted. Without this empirical verifiability there is no way to call any mathematical knowledge true justified belief in the strict sense of knowledge proper. Furthermore, mathematics refer to things and instances in the world in the same way that language does. Mathematics can be considered as a language as such.

This aim cannot be met by foundationalist reductions, which fail to account for the holistic character of theories. The foundationalist Cartesian cogito considered above demonstrates that this project does not count for important empirical aspects of it. Even in the deepest of meditations Descartes had to eventually go eat, or go to the bathroom. In his deepest self there were still dogs barking next door, or his toothache may have come back. The foundationalist cannot create a non-empirical contra-natural foundation.

Finally, the aim of epistemology is best served by the empirical study of the relation between our sensory input and our theoretical output (science). *A priori* knowledge then, not having any empirical ground or justification would be vacuous. I can come to know things by reason alone which there is no real world or empirical truth-value for but to deny the connection between the sense perception origin of these concepts and the fictions that can be constructed from them would be incorrect and never true justified belief.

Quine sees this dilemma and reduces the attempt to psychology. Science still remains as the paradigm of our knowledge. Anything that was not scientifically verifiable would not be considered true justified belief. Things considered by reason alone need to have a real world justification to be considered knowledge.

To conclude, in attempt to bring together the scope of the paper, I will use an example where *a priori* may be trivialized but at the same time may be possible. There are two different forms of identity statements. The first form is where two separate terms are synonymous with each other. These cases have the logical form of (a = b). Such a case would have the language form of: Quine is the author of *Epistemology Naturalized*. The second is an identity statement where the two terms are identical to each other. These cases have the logical structure of (a = a). Such a case would have the language form of: Quine is Quine. One can immediately see that although both are identity statements, there is a difference in the two assertions. The former statement gives us a genuine extension of our knowledge. The latter does not provide any information as such.

In cases of (a = a), there is no information provided. One could assert that, within the soft view, a competent language user could come to know (a = a) by reason alone. The problem I see here with considering this as *a priori* knowledge rests in the triviality of the assertion. If someone is a competent language user, the sentence, Quine is Quine, would not arise in any common usage of the language. This usage would only arise in a philosophy paper or in a mathematical equation. Even if the triviality were overlooked, one would still need to go into the world to justify the claim that 1 = 1. The belief is only verified when one has experienced the number 1 in relation to the number of objects it denotes in many cases and only then can they abstract the universal notion of 1.

If something does not provide information it is not a genuine extension of our knowledge in the same sense as understanding the sentence, Quine is the author of *Epistemology Naturalized*. If someone does not read Quine beforehand and did not know that Quine is the author of *Epistemology Naturalized* then the realization of Quine as the author of *Epistemology Naturalized* is a genuine extension of the individual's knowledge. Unfortunately there is no case I can bring to mind that would be both *a priori* and would provide a genuine extension of knowledge. Even in the earlier case of the right triangle, ultimately one would have to go out into the world and verify in-the-world the actual empirical justification for a right triangle.

If one is to consider the soft version of *a priori* knowledge acceptable, and if one considers statements with the logical structure of (a = a) as valid extensions of knowledge then it could be the case that *a priori* knowledge is possible. Conversely, if one is to consider the hard view as the only possibility for *a priori* knowledge then I cannot see how it could ever be attained even in cases where a numerical identity relation is stated.

If one is to follow Quine then the identity statements are *unintelligible* and are not known *a priori* because of their lack in empirical ground. In fact, for Quine, the naturalization of epistemology is the empirical grounding of knowledge as not only scientifically grounded but also as a branch of psychology.

One final consideration that may worry some readers is that if science is the paradigm of knowledge, and if *a priori* knowledge is not possible then there is no absolute and unchanging knowledge. The question whether or not this is to be considered an epistemologically disastrous problem I will leave open.