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# THE COHERENCE OF EMPIRICISM

BY

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**Abstract:** Rationalists often argue that empiricism is incoherent and conclude, on that basis, that some knowledge is a priori. I contend that such arguments *against* empiricism cannot be parlayed into an argument in *support* of the a priori since rationalism is open to the same arguments. I go on to offer an alternative strategy. The leading idea is that, instead of offering *a priori* arguments *against* empiricism, rationalists should marshal *empirical support* for their position.

## 1. *Introduction*

The debate over a priori knowledge often proceeds in negative terms. For example, in the first half of the twentieth century, it was common to maintain that all a priori knowledge is analytic on the grounds that there is no plausible explanation of how we acquire synthetic a priori knowledge. Whatever the merits of this argument *against* the synthetic a priori, many now recognize that it cannot be parlayed into an argument in *support* of the analytic a priori.<sup>1</sup> For we have *no better* explanation of how we acquire such knowledge.

In recent years empiricism has come under attack. Some argue that the view is incoherent and conclude, on that basis, that some knowledge is a priori.<sup>2</sup> We need to recall here the lesson of history. Whatever the merits of such arguments *against* empiricism, they cannot be parlayed into an argument in *support* of the a priori unless the latter is not open to those arguments.

My primary contention is that the a priori *is* open to the arguments offered against empiricism. Hence, they do not advance the case for the a priori. I go on to offer an alternative strategy. The leading idea is that, instead of offering *a priori* arguments *against* empiricism, rationalists should marshal *empirical support* for their position.

## 2. *Empiricism Rejected*

Laurence Bonjour's excellent book, *In Defense of Pure Reason*, provides an interesting case study. His charge against empiricism is that it leads to skepticism.<sup>3</sup> The supporting argument, called *the skeptical argument*, is deceptively straightforward. Assume that some beliefs are directly justified solely by experience. Such beliefs are "particular rather than general in their content and are confined to situations observable at specific and fairly narrowly delineated places and times."<sup>4</sup> Either some beliefs whose content goes beyond direct experience are justified or skepticism is true. The justification of beliefs whose content goes beyond direct experience requires inference from the directly justified beliefs. But inference involves principles that are justified *a priori*:

For if the conclusions of the inferences genuinely go beyond the content of direct experience, then it is impossible that those inferences could be entirely justified by appeal to that same experience.<sup>5</sup>

Hence, either empiricism is false or skepticism is true.

The skeptical argument, however, proves too much. For the very same argument can be employed in defense of empiricism! Assume that some beliefs are directly justified by rational insight. Either some beliefs whose content goes beyond direct rational insight are justified or skepticism is true. The justification of beliefs whose content goes beyond direct rational insight requires principles of inference that are justified *empirically*:

For if the conclusions of the inferences genuinely go beyond the content of direct rational insight, then it is impossible that those inferences could be entirely justified by appeal to that same insight.

Hence, either principles of inference are justified *empirically* or skepticism is true.<sup>6</sup>

No rationalist would take this argument seriously. The obvious reply is that a belief directly justified by some rational insight *R*, in conjunction with a belief in a principle of inference directly justified by some other rational insight *R\**, can indirectly justify a belief whose content goes beyond that of the directly justified beliefs. The same response, however, is open to empiricists. They can maintain that a belief directly justified by some experience *E*, in conjunction with a belief in a principle of inference directly justified by some other experience *E\**, can indirectly justify a belief whose content goes beyond that of the directly justified beliefs. Hence, for the skeptical argument to succeed, Bonjour must show that experience cannot directly justify principles of inference.

Although he is not explicit on this point, the underlying argument appears to turn on three claims. The first is a thesis about the nature of

experience: it is limited to *particular* objects in close spatio-temporal proximity. The second is an epistemic thesis: no experience can directly justify a belief whose content goes beyond that of the experience. The third is a thesis about principles of inference: they are *general* in character.<sup>7</sup> Putting these claims together yields the following argument, called *the generality argument*:

- (1) Experience is limited to *particular* objects.
- (2) No experience can directly justify a belief whose content goes beyond that of the experience.
- (3) Principles of inference are *general*.
- (4) Therefore, experience cannot directly justify principles of inference.

We are now faced with two questions. Is rationalism open to the generality argument? This issue is addressed in Section 3. Can empiricism avoid skepticism? BonJour's skeptical argument involves two assumptions about epistemic justification: foundationalism and internalism. Coherentism rejects the dichotomy between directly and indirectly justified beliefs and maintains that one's beliefs are justified collectively rather than individually. Externalism denies that justified belief in a general principle requires having a reason for thinking that it is likely to be true. Coherentist empiricism is addressed in Sections 4 and 5. Internalist and externalist versions of foundationalist empiricism are explored in Section 6.

### 3. *Generality*

The question before us is whether rationalism is open to the generality argument. The second premise of the argument appears to be a consequence of a more general epistemic principle:

- (2\*) No cognitive state can directly justify a belief whose content goes beyond that of the state.

The third premise is also general. Indirect a priori justification, as well as indirect empirical justification, requires *general* principles of inference. Hence, if rational insight is limited to particular objects, skepticism is a consequence of rationalism.

Rationalists, however, claim that there is a fundamental difference between experience and thought. Although we experience only particular objects, we apprehend properties of objects. Furthermore, it is our apprehension of properties that directly justifies general beliefs.<sup>8</sup> Hence, rationalism can avoid skepticism only if it can sustain the claim that we apprehend abstract entities such as properties.

Empiricists find the claim puzzling. One source of perplexity is that rationalists do not offer a non-metaphorical characterization of this alleged cognitive capacity. Terms such as 'apprehend' and 'insight' suggest an analogy to perception. Perception, however, requires causal contact with the object perceived and properties cannot stand in causal relations. Rationalists maintain that the perceptual metaphor is misleading. But, in the absence of a non-metaphorical characterization, they are not in a position to state, let alone defend, the claim that we apprehend general features of objects.

BonJour maintains that the apprehension of properties involved in a priori justification is the same as that involved in thought in general. His goal is to explain the apprehension of properties in terms of a more general theory of how a thought can be about, or have as its content, some particular property. If the more general theory is to successfully underwrite the contention that the apprehension of properties does not involve a quasi-perceptual relation to those properties, it must explain, without appeal to such relations, how a thought can have as its content some particular property. BonJour proposes that a thought has as its content some particular property in virtue of its *intrinsic* character rather than in virtue of some *relation*, quasi-perceptual or otherwise, to that property. More specifically, he maintains:

In order for the intrinsic character of the thought to specify precisely *that* particular property to the exclusion of anything else, the property in question must *itself* somehow be metaphysically involved in that character.<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, however, a thought about, for example, the property triangularity does not literally instantiate that property since the thought is not itself triangular. BonJour suggests that such a thought instantiates a complex universal which involves triangularity as a component:

The key claim of such a view would be that it is a necessary, quasi-logical fact that a thought instantiating a complex universal involving the universal triangularity in the appropriate way . . . is about triangular *things*.<sup>10</sup>

If, for example, a cognizer's thought that nothing can be both red and green all over instantiates a complex universal of which redness and greenness are constituents, then there is no need to introduce a quasi-perceptual relation between cognizer and properties to account for the content of that thought. Consequently, there is no need to introduce such a relation to account for the cognizer's apprehension of those properties.

Let us take stock. The generality argument maintains that experience cannot justify general principles since the content of experience is particular. Although we experience red *objects* and green *objects*, we don't

experience the properties of redness and greenness *themselves*. We experience only *instances* of these properties. Experience of *instances* of properties, however, is not sufficient to justify *general* beliefs. Rationalism can avoid the skeptical consequence of the generality argument only if it can sustain the claim that we can apprehend not only *instances* of properties but also the properties *themselves*.<sup>11</sup> Rationalism can sustain the latter claim only if it can provide a non-metaphorical account of the apprehension of properties themselves that does not involve some kind of quasi-perceptual relation to those properties. BonJour proposes to explain the apprehension of a property itself in terms of an account of how a thought can have as its content that property. Although he sets out to offer an account of how a thought can have as its content some particular *property*, such as triangularity, he does *not* provide such an account. Instead, he provides only the bare outline of an account of how a thought can have as its content *particular* triangular *objects* or *instances* of triangularity.<sup>12</sup> Since he does not provide an account of how a thought can have as its content triangularity *itself*, he fails to provide *any* account, let alone a *non-relational* account, of the apprehension of properties. Hence, BonJour's account reinforces, rather than resolves, the empiricist's perplexity.

Rationalists are faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, they can endorse the view that a thought instantiating a complex universal of which redness and greenness are constituents is sufficient to directly justify the general belief that nothing is both red and green all over. Since such a thought is about, or has as its content, *particular* red and *particular* green *objects*, this endorsement represents a denial of (2\*). But if rationalists concede that the apprehension of *particular objects* instantiating properties, rather than the apprehension of the *properties themselves*, directly justifies general principles, they cannot maintain, without further argument, that the experience of particular objects instantiating properties cannot directly justify general principles. Hence, on the first option, premiss (2) of the generality argument must be rejected as *ad hoc*.

On the other hand, rationalists can insist that only the apprehension of the *properties themselves* can directly justify general principles. Such rationalists would deny that a thought instantiating a complex universal of which redness and greenness are constituents is sufficient to directly justify a general belief. They would insist that although BonJour has taken an important first step towards providing an account of the apprehension of properties, the account is incomplete.<sup>13</sup> On this option, rationalists concede that they have not offered a non-metaphorical account of the apprehension of properties. In the absence of such an account, rationalism cannot underwrite the key claim that the content of thought is not limited to particular objects and, as a consequence, is open to the generality argument. Therefore, on either option, rationalism fares *no better* than empiricism with respect to the generality argument.

#### 4. *Meta-Reasons*

We argued that empiricism is no more vulnerable than rationalism to the generality argument. This result, however, is not sufficient to establish that empiricism can offer a plausible account of knowledge of general principles. The most prominent theory, due to W. V. O. Quine, rejects foundationalism. BonJour alleges that coherentist empiricism (c-empiricism, for short) faces two serious objections.<sup>14</sup> My goal, in Sections 4 and 5, is to argue that rationalism faces the same objections.

The first maintains that in order for a person to be justified in believing that *p*, the person must be in possession of a reason for thinking that *p* is likely to be true. According to c-empiricism, a system of beliefs satisfying standards such as simplicity, scope, fecundity, explanatory adequacy, and conservatism is justified. But, asks BonJour,

What reason can be offered for thinking that a system of beliefs which is simpler, more conservative, explanatorily more adequate, etc., is thereby more likely to be true, that following such standards is at least somewhat conducive to finding the truth?<sup>15</sup>

C-empiricists are faced with a dilemma. Either they offer an a priori or an empirical argument in support of the truth-conduciveness of the standards. The former is incompatible with empiricism. The latter is question-begging since it must ultimately appeal to some of the standards it is attempting to justify.

This objection turns on the claim that being epistemically justified in believing that *p* requires having a reason for thinking that *p* is likely to be true. The expression “having a reason to think that *p* is likely to be true” is ambiguous. Let us distinguish two senses:

- (B) S has a *basic* reason R to believe that *p* if and only if S has R and R makes it likely that *p* is true;
- (M) S has a *meta*-reason R to believe that *p* if and only if S has R and S has reason to believe that R makes it likely that *p* is true.

Let  $\Phi$  be the set of conditions that, according to c-empiricism, constitute coherence. Assume that belonging to a system of beliefs satisfying  $\Phi$  makes it likely that *p* is true. If S cognitively grasps the fact that *p* belongs to such a system, then S has a *basic* reason to believe that *p*. BonJour’s charge is that c-empiricists cannot offer an argument to show that such reasons are truth-conducive. Hence, the problem pertains to having a *meta*-reason to believe that *p*.

Does rationalism fare any better on this score? Assume that having an apparent rational insight that *p* makes it likely that *p* is true. Hence, if S has an apparent rational insight that *p*, then S has a *basic* reason to believe that *p*. Rationalists are now faced with the question:

What reason can be offered for thinking that a belief based on apparent rational insight is thereby more likely to be true?

An a priori argument is circular since it is based on rational insight and an empirical argument undercuts the a priori status of justification based on rational insight.<sup>16</sup>

BonJour recognizes the problem. His response is to argue that a priori justification does *not* require a meta-reason. The requirement is question-begging because rationalism maintains that apparent rational insight is an excellent reason, in its own right, for accepting a belief:

[It] amounts simply and obviously to a refusal to take rational insight seriously as a basis for justification: a refusal for which the present objection can offer no further rationale, and which is thus question-begging.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, a priori justified belief that *p* only requires having a basic reason for that belief.

C-empiricists, however, can offer a similar response. According to c-empiricism, *p*'s belonging to a system satisfying  $\Phi$  is a basic reason to believe that *p*. BonJour does not dispute this claim. Instead, he moves directly to a demand for a meta-reason. But such a demand presupposes that belonging to a system of beliefs satisfying  $\Phi$  is not an excellent reason, in its own right, for accepting a belief, which begs the question against c-empiricism.<sup>18</sup> Hence, c-empiricism fares *no worse* than rationalism with respect to the demand for meta-reasons.<sup>19</sup>

## 5. *Revisability*

BonJour's second objection to c-empiricism is that its standards for belief revision do not impose any constraints on epistemic justification:

After all, any such standard, since it cannot on Quinean grounds be justified or shown to be epistemically relevant independently of considerations of adjustment to experience, is itself merely one more strand (or node?) in the web, and thus equally open to revision.<sup>20</sup>

Hence, whenever those standards appear to dictate that some belief should be revised, such revision can be avoided by revising the standards themselves. The response that such revision is not reasonable or justified cannot be sustained:

To appeal to the very standards themselves, for example, to the principle of conservatism in order to defend the reluctance to revise the principle of conservatism, is obviously circular; while any further standard, even a meta-standard having to do with the revision of first-level standards, will itself be equally open to revision.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, c-empiricists lack a rationale for not revising the principles of coherence in the face of recalcitrant experience as opposed to giving up some other belief in the system.

BonJour's objection rests on two principles:

- (P1) Beliefs justified by experience are revisable; and
- (P2) The standards for revising beliefs justified by experience are themselves justified by experience.

From these two principles it follows that

- (P3) The standards for revising beliefs justified by experience are themselves revisable.

But moderate rationalism endorses analogues of these two principles:

- (P1\*) Beliefs justified by apparent rational insight are revisable; and
- (P2\*) The standards for revising beliefs justified by apparent rational insight are themselves justified by apparent rational insight.<sup>22</sup>

Hence, moderate rationalism is committed to

- (P3\*) The standards for revising beliefs justified by apparent rational insight are themselves revisable.

The remainder of BonJour's argument applies with equal force to moderate rationalism and c-empiricism. Any attempt to block revision of the standards for belief revision either appeals to the standards themselves, which is circular, or invokes some further standard, which is itself revisable. Hence, once again, rationalism fares *no better* than empiricism.

An examination of BonJour's account confirms this conclusion. He offers two procedures for a priori belief revision: (1) reflection on the state or process that led to the belief in question; and (2) coherence among a priori justified beliefs.<sup>23</sup> Consider the second. Let  $\Phi$  = the principles that underlie coherence. Assume that S has an a priori justified belief that p, an a priori justified belief that q, an a priori justified belief that  $\Phi$ , and an a priori justified belief that  $\sim\Phi(p, q)$ . In the face of such incoherence, S can retain both the belief that p and the belief that q by revising the principles that underlie coherence. BonJour blocks this move by maintaining that

The *prima facie* justification of the fundamental premises or principles that underlie the conception of coherence in question must be stronger than that of the other claims whose justification is being assessed, so that there is a *a priori* justification for thinking that in a case

of incoherence, it is some among those other claims, rather than the fundamental premises or principles of coherence themselves, that are mistaken.<sup>24</sup>

If S's a priori justification for the belief that  $\Phi$  is greater than S's justification for either the belief that p or the belief that q, then the expedient of rejecting  $\Phi$  is blocked.

Can this strategy be sustained? Consider S's belief that

- (5) My justification for the belief that  $\Phi$  is greater than my justification for either the belief that p or the belief that q.

This belief is itself justified a priori and subject to revision. Hence, S can preserve both the belief that p and the belief that q by revising (5). The rationalist will surely respond that such a revision is unjustified or unreasonable. But the response cannot be defended. To claim that S's justification for the belief that (5) is greater than S's justification for either the belief that p or the belief that q is circular. It appeals to a belief about the strength of a priori justification to defend the reluctance to revise a belief about the strength of a priori justification. If one introduces some further standard having to do with the revision of justified beliefs about one's degree of a priori justification, that standard itself is open to revision. The only remaining option is to maintain that beliefs about the degree of one's a priori justification are so fundamental that they cannot be independently justified.

Rationalists can constrain a priori belief revision by claiming that a priori justification comes in degrees and that beliefs about the degree of one's a priori justification are not subject to independent justification. But, surely, the same strategy is open to c-empiricists. They can also maintain that not all beliefs within a coherent system are justified to the same degree and that beliefs about the degree of one's empirical justification are not subject to independent justification. Hence, belief revision is *no more* a problem for empiricism than for rationalism.

## 6. *Foundationalism*

We have arrived at the conclusion that c-empiricism fares no worse than rationalism with respect to BonJour's criticisms. What are the prospects for a foundationalist version of empiricism (f-empiricism, for short)? The only argument against f-empiricism is the generality argument. If f-empiricism cannot offer an account of the justification of general principles, as BonJour alleges, then it is committed to a version of skepticism: the *only* justified beliefs are those directly justified by experience. The generality argument, however, involves an important internalist constraint

on epistemic justification: S is justified in believing that p only if S has some reason to believe that p is likely to be true. The basic claim of the generality argument is that experience alone cannot provide a reason for believing that a general principle is likely to be true. There are two options for the f-empiricist. The first is to endorse internalism and address the generality argument. The second is to reject internalism in favor of externalism.

Internalist f-empiricism is open to the generality argument. But, as we argued in Section 3, rationalism is also open to the argument. Hence, rationalists are faced with a dilemma: either accept or reject (2\*). If (2\*) is accepted, then internalist foundationalism is not a viable option for *either* rationalists or empiricists. Both the rationalist and empiricist varieties of internalist foundationalism lead to skepticism. If (2\*) is rejected, however, internalist foundationalism is a viable option for *both* rationalism and empiricism.

Rationalists who reject (2\*) maintain that some apprehensions of particular objects instantiating properties directly justify general beliefs. A fully articulated rationalist theory of this sort will include a basic epistemic principle stating conditions under which such apprehensions directly justify general principles. This option, however, is also open to empiricists. They can maintain that some experiences of particular objects instantiating properties directly justify general principles. A fully articulated empiricist theory of this sort will include a basic epistemic principle stating conditions under which such experiences directly justify general principles. Rationalists may balk at such a principle. But, unless they can offer some reason for preferring their epistemic principle over that of the empiricist, the claim is *ad hoc*. Although BonJour does not explicitly address the question of criteria for the acceptability of epistemic principles, he suggests, in the context of his discussion of c-empiricism, that one such criterion is truth-conduciveness. But, since he also concedes that rationalists cannot provide a reason to believe that apparent rational insight is truth-conducive, they are not in a position to maintain that this criterion provides a basis for preferring rationalism over empiricism. Hence, internalist f-empiricism is *no more* problematic than internalist rationalism.

BonJour briefly considers the possibility that empiricists might reject internalism in favor of externalism.<sup>25</sup> More specifically, the empiricist might deny the claim that S's justified belief that p requires having a reason to believe that p is likely to be true. As we saw in Section 4, the locution "having a reason for thinking that p is likely to be true" is ambiguous. Hence, we must distinguish two versions of internalism. According to *basic* internalism,

- (BI) S's belief that p is justified only if S has a *basic* reason to believe that p.

According to *meta*-internalism,

- (MI) S's belief that p is justified only if S has a *meta*-reason to believe that p.

Analogously, there are two versions of externalism. Basic externalism denies that basic reasons are necessary for justification, while meta-externalism denies that meta-reasons are necessary.

BonJour offers only one argument against externalism:

[W]hatever account externalists may offer for concepts like knowledge or justification, there is still a plain and undeniable sense in which if externalism is the final story, we have no reason to think that any of our beliefs are true; and this result obviously amounts by itself to a very strong and intuitively implausible version of skepticism.<sup>26</sup>

Although he is not explicit in this context about what is required to avoid skepticism, he maintains elsewhere that “the fundamental sceptical move is to challenge the adequacy of our reasons for accepting our beliefs. . . .”<sup>27</sup> Clearly, (BI) is not sufficient to meet this challenge. Although (BI) requires that one possess some reason R in order to be justified in believing that p, it does not require that one have a reason for thinking that R is truth-conducive. But, to address the charge that R is not an adequate reason to believe that p, one must offer some reason to believe that R is truth-conducive. (MI), on the other hand, does address the skeptical challenge. Since (MI) requires, for being justified in believing that p, both that one possess some reason R for believing that p and some reason for believing that R is truth-conducive, one who satisfies these conditions is in a position to offer some reason for thinking that one's reasons are adequate. As we saw in Section 4, however, BonJour acknowledges that rationalism cannot meet the demand for meta-reasons. Hence, (MI), which addresses the skeptic's challenge, is not an option for rationalists and (BI), which is an option for rationalists, does not address the skeptic's challenge. Since the only version of internalism available to rationalism cannot meet the skeptical challenge, internalist rationalism fares *no better* than externalism with respect to skepticism.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, we conclude that neither internalist nor externalist f-empiricism is *worse off* than rationalism.

## 7. *Rationalism Revisited*

The strategy of arguing against empiricism fails to advance the case for rationalism. Is there a more promising alternative available to rationalists? My suggestion is that they exploit two related strategies. Both involve enlisting *empirical support* for rationalism rather than offering *a priori*

*objections* to empiricism. The first is to enlist empirical support for the truth-conduciveness of rational insight. Rationalism enjoys a distinct advantage with respect to the issue of truth-conduciveness. Empiricism maintains that experience is the *only* source of justification. Consequently, it cannot offer a non-circular justification for the truth-conduciveness of experience. Since rationalism recognizes two distinct sources of justification, it can offer a non-circular justification for the truth-conduciveness of one of them. Moreover, in the context of its dispute with empiricism, the truth-conduciveness of experience is not in question. Hence, rationalism can exploit this point of agreement to offer a justification of the truth-conduciveness of rational insight that meets empiricist standards. The second is to offer an explanation of the truth-conduciveness of rational insight. Rationalists generally agree that the truth-conduciveness of rational insight cannot be explained in terms of causal-perceptual models. Hence, if rationalism is to provide some explanation of our alleged capacity for a priori justification, it must offer an alternative model of how such justification is possible. Furthermore, if the model is to be regarded as a plausible explanation of *our* capacity for a priori justification, rationalism must offer empirical evidence showing that the model is realized in human cognition. I conclude by outlining two projects based on these strategies which, if successfully completed, would advance the case for rationalism.<sup>29</sup>

In order to enlist empirical support for the truth-conduciveness of the alleged source of a priori justification, rationalism must be more fully articulated. In particular, rationalists must provide a generally accepted description of the cognitive state that directly justifies beliefs a priori, the type of beliefs it justifies, and the conditions under which it justifies the beliefs in question. Opponents of rationalism often claim that they find cognitive states such as rational insight puzzling or even mysterious. Rationalists typically bridle at the claim and respond with remarks such as “What could be more familiar?” followed by a phenomenological description of the state. Yet, if one surveys these descriptions, one finds enormous variation:

1. a direct insight into the nature of properties;
2. the unthinkableability of the falsehood of the proposition;<sup>30</sup>
3. finding yourself utterly convinced that the proposition is not only true but could not have been false;<sup>31</sup>
4. it intellectually seems to you that the proposition is true;<sup>32</sup>
5. an inclination to believe the proposition that is rooted in understanding.<sup>33</sup>

Rationalists are faced with a dilemma. Either we have direct introspective access to the cognitive states that provide direct a priori justification or

we do not. If we do, sympathetic and sophisticated proponents of the position should be able to arrive at some consensus over the correct description of those states. If we do not, then some alternative rationale must be offered to support the claim that there are such states. The lack of consensus among rationalists lends support to the claim that something more needs to be said here.

There is also wide variation among rationalists over the scope of beliefs justified a priori. These differences often do not manifest themselves within epistemological contexts since the focus is on stock examples such as elementary logical or mathematical propositions, simple analytic truths, and a few familiar cases of alleged synthetic a priori truths. An exclusive focus on these cases, however, does not allow the rationalist to address the question of whether the cognitive states that are alleged to justify these beliefs are truth-conducive. To address this question, two factors are essential. First, the full range of beliefs alleged to be justified by the state must be provided, including the controversial and discredited cases. Second, the different types of beliefs, including metaphysical, methodological, logical, mathematical, modal, scientific, and moral, must be taken into account. For one key question is whether truth-conduciveness varies across these different categories. In the absence of a more complete articulation of the scope of the a priori, the crucial issue of truth-conduciveness will remain a subject of speculation, supported or rejected by bits of anecdotal evidence.

Finally, the conditions under which beliefs are justified a priori must be addressed. There are two distinct sets of issues here. The first is a specification of the conditions under which beliefs are prima facie justified by rational insight (or whatever other cognitive state is proposed as the source of a priori justification). BonJour maintains that there are certain background conditions that must be satisfied in order for an apparent rational insight to have its justificatory force: the proposition must be considered with reasonable care, the person must have an approximate grasp of the concept of necessity, and one's reason must not be clouded by dogmatism or bias.<sup>34</sup> Two questions emerge. Is the list complete? Do the conditions introduce concepts that require further articulation? For example, one condition is that the cognizer have an *adequate grasp* of the concept of necessity. But in the absence of a non-metaphorical characterization of the relation in question and some means of determining when a grasp of a concept is adequate, one cannot determine whether the condition is satisfied. The second is a specification of the conditions under which prima facie a priori justification is defeasible. Defeaters fall into two broad categories: overriding defeaters and undermining defeaters.<sup>35</sup> There are two primary questions in the case of overriding defeaters. First, under what conditions, if any, do conflicts of rational insight undermine justification based on such insight? Second, can there be empirically justified

overriding defeaters for beliefs justified a priori? Parallel questions arise in the case of undermining defeaters. Does a track record of conflicting beliefs or errors based on rational insight undermine justification based on such insight? Can a priori justified beliefs be defeated by empirically justified beliefs regarding the neuro-physical processes that underlie rational insight?

The second project is to show that the cognitive states identified at the phenomenological level are associated with a single type of process or a unified group of processes that play a role in producing or sustaining the beliefs they allegedly justify and in explaining how they justify the beliefs in question. This project serves three purposes. The first is to show the bearing of the philosophical theory to *human* knowledge. If the cognitive processes involved in the theory play no role in producing or sustaining the beliefs that they are alleged to justify, then the theory provides no explanation of the justification of our *actual* beliefs. Moreover, if those processes *cannot* produce or sustain the beliefs in question, then the theory does not even explain how we *can* justify our beliefs. The other purposes are more theoretical. The distinctive claim of a rationalist epistemology is that there are two basic types of justification: experiential and non-experiential. Initially, this difference is marked at the phenomenological level. If the cognitive processes associated with these phenomenological markers manifest no significant differences in their features or the manner in which they produce beliefs, then there will be legitimate questions about the significance of the experiential/non-experiential distinction. If they do, then these differences may deepen our understanding of this distinction. Finally, there is the prospect of understanding how the states in question justify the beliefs they produce. In particular, a better understanding of the underlying processes may help us understand how the cognitive states identified at the phenomenological level produce true beliefs about the subject matter in question. This understanding, in turn, is the key to providing a non-causal-perceptual account of rational insight and explaining why such insight is truth-conducive.

## 8. *Residual Problems*

Two residual problems remain. I have argued that rationalists should offer empirical support for the truth-conduciveness of rational insight. As we saw in Section 6, BonJour maintains that such a strategy undermines the a priori status of beliefs justified by rational insight. This claim, however, rests on an incorrect view of the epistemic function of such empirical support. Consider his response to the challenge that rationalists offer some reason for believing that rational insight is truth-conducive:

The implicit suggestion is that one who accepts a claim on the basis of such insight must be appealing, at least tacitly, to a premise of this sort as an essential part of the alleged justifying reason in order for a justification that is genuinely epistemic in character to even putatively result.<sup>36</sup>

Hence, he concludes that offering empirical support for the truth-conduciveness of apparent rational insight undercuts its a priori status.

It is important, however, to distinguish two different rationales for such a demand. The first is the demand of a meta-internalist who maintains that having a meta-reason for believing that *p* is a necessary condition for being justified in believing that *p*. The second is the demand of an empiricist for a reason to accept the rationalist's epistemic theory or, more specifically, the rationalist's account of a priori justification. Here the critic is not maintaining that in order for *S* to be a priori justified in believing that *p*, *S* must have some reason to believe that rational insight is truth-conducive. Instead, the critic is arguing that, since epistemic justification requires an essential connection with truth, reasonable acceptance of the rationalist's central contention – that rational insight is a source of epistemic justification – requires reasonable belief that rational insight is truth-conducive. The first strategy proposed in Section 7 provides rationalism with a response to such an empiricist critic.

One might still maintain that the strategy is hopelessly circular. For BonJour has argued that experience cannot justify general principles. Since the claim that rational insight is truth-conducive is general, the rationalist must admit that, if it is justified, its justification involves an a priori element. Two points are relevant here. First, my primary negative thesis is that it is a mistake in strategy to support rationalism by arguing that empiricism leads to skepticism. For, as was shown in Section 3, rationalism is also open to the argument. Therefore, the rationalist should give up the skeptical argument. Second, we must distinguish two distinct epistemic issues. The first is defending the claim that general principles are known (or justifiably believed) against *skeptical* challenges. What is at issue here is the *existence* of knowledge of (or justification for believing) such principles. The second is defending the claim that general principles are known (or justifiably believed) *a priori* against *empiricist* challenges. Empiricists are not skeptics. They maintain that many general principles, including logical and mathematical principles, *are* justified. Their disagreement with rationalists is *not* over the *existence* of knowledge of (or justification for believing) general principles but over the *source* of that knowledge (or justification). Hence, rationalists can successfully resolve their dispute with empiricists by offering empirical support for the general claim that rational insight is truth-conducive. If their supporting case involves only general principles that empiricists regard as justified and

the evidence meets the standards that empiricists regard as adequate for justification, then reasonable empiricists must concede that there are cogent grounds for endorsing rationalism.

## 9. Conclusion

Rationalists have not fully exploited the available resources for advancing their case. They have focused their efforts on offering a priori arguments against empiricism. I argue that this strategy ultimately fails since rationalism is also open to those arguments. On the positive side, I suggest that a more fruitful approach for rationalists is to offer a fuller articulation of their position and to utilize the articulation to offer empirical evidence that supports the central claim that rational insight is truth-conducive and provides some explanation of this fact.<sup>37</sup>

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Laurence Bonjour, *In Defense of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Chapter 2; Panayot Butchvarov, *The Concept of Knowledge* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), Part 2; Albert Casullo, "Analyticity and the A Priori," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supp. Vol. 18 (1993): 113–50.

<sup>2</sup> George Bealer, "The Incoherence of Empiricism," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. 66 (1992): 99–138; Laurence Bonjour, *op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> I use 'empiricism' to refer to the position that denies the existence of a priori justification. Bonjour uses it to refer to the position that denies that the mind has the capacity to apprehend necessary features about the structure of reality and uses 'radical empiricism' to refer to the former position. Nothing of significance turns on this difference.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Bonjour (pp. 4–5) offers a second argument, which he regards as a generalized version of the argument in the text, in support of the claim that empiricism leads to skepticism. This argument also proves too much since it can be employed in defense of empiricism.

<sup>7</sup> Bonjour (p. 5, n. 4) maintains that empirical principles cannot justify beliefs that go beyond what we directly experience because "the full justification of any inference that relies on such an empirical principle would presuppose an a priori justification for the transition (presumably inductive in character . . .) from observations proper to the empirical principle in question. . . ." Induction is necessary to justify empirical principles only if such principles are *general*.

<sup>8</sup> Bonjour (p. 162) articulates the view as follows: "A person apprehends or grasps, for example, the properties redness and greenness, and supposedly 'sees' on the basis of this apprehension that they cannot be jointly instantiated. Such a picture clearly seems to presuppose that as a result of this apprehension or grasping, the properties of redness and

greenness are themselves before the mind in a way that allows their natures and mutual incompatibility to be apparent.”

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184. The emphasis is mine.

<sup>11</sup> Although I am stressing here the requirements of the generality argument, one should keep in mind that the intuitive picture of rational insight also requires that properties *themselves* are apprehended. See the passage quoted in note 8.

<sup>12</sup> One might suggest that to provide an account of how a thought can have as its content triangular *objects* is to provide an account of how a thought can have as its content triangularity *itself*, since a thought cannot be about triangular objects unless its content involves triangularity. An analogous point, however, can be made with respect to experience. An experience cannot have as its content triangular objects unless its content involves triangularity. In order to generate an asymmetry between thought and experience, the rationalist must maintain that (a) for a cognitive state to have a property *itself* as content it is not sufficient that it have *objects* instantiating that property as content; and (b) thought, but not experience, can satisfy the additional requirements.

<sup>13</sup> BonJour (p. 185) appears to endorse this position: “it is clear that the distinction between thinking about an instance of a property and thinking about the property itself, between thinking about a triangular thing and thinking about triangularity, would have to be somehow accounted for.”

<sup>14</sup> BonJour offers a third argument against the naturalized version of c-empiricism. I don’t consider this argument since, as he acknowledges, c-empiricism and naturalism are independent positions.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>16</sup> BonJour’s contention that an empirical argument undercuts the a priori status of justification based on rational insight is addressed in Section 8.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>18</sup> BonJour (p. 43, n. 9), maintains that a priori and empirical knowledge are sufficiently different that what holds for one need not hold for the other. But he is not explicit about the relevant differences.

<sup>19</sup> BonJour (p. 148, n. 12) concludes that apparent rational insight is so fundamental that it does not admit of independent justification but contends that coherence does not have this status since it “depends essentially on principles, such as the principle of non-contradiction and others, that must be justified in some other way.” The latter claim is clearly question-begging since it simply denies that the principles that define coherence do not admit of independent justification.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Rationalists cannot avoid the problem by rejecting (P2\*) in favor of

(P2\*\*) The standards for revising beliefs justified by apparent rational insight are themselves justified by experience.

For (P1) and (P2\*\*) entail (P3\*).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 116–18.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>25</sup> BonJour presents this option in the context of his discussion of c-empiricism. If my subsequent argument is sound, externalism is a viable option for both foundationalist and coherentist empiricism.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>28</sup> BonJour may think that conceptual considerations also tell against externalism. Such a claim requires independent consideration. I take it that BonJour's claim here is that externalism should be rejected even if those considerations fail.

<sup>29</sup> These projects are more fully developed in Albert Casullo, "A Priori Knowledge Appraised," in Albert Casullo (ed.), *A Priori Knowledge*, The International Research Library of Philosophy (Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing Company, 1999).

<sup>30</sup> Butchvarov, pp. 94–5.

<sup>31</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 105.

<sup>32</sup> George Bealer, "A Priori Knowledge and the Scope of Philosophy," *Philosophical Studies* 81 (1996): 163–74.

<sup>33</sup> Ernest Sosa, "Rational Intuition: Bealer on its Nature and Epistemic Status," *Philosophical Studies* 81 (1996): 151–62.

<sup>34</sup> BonJour, pp. 133–7. He offers two different descriptions of what occurs when a cognizer fails to satisfy a background condition for justification by an apparent rational insight: (1) the cognizer fails to have even an apparent rational insight; and (2) the justificatory force of the apparent rational insight is defeated. See also Tyler Burge, "Content Preservation," *Philosophical Review* 102 (1993): 457–88.

<sup>35</sup> S's justified belief that not-p is an overriding defeater for S's justified belief that p. S's justified belief that some circumstance exists which makes it unlikely S's belief that p is true given S's justification is an undermining defeater for S's justified belief that p.

<sup>36</sup> BonJour, p. 143.

<sup>37</sup> Thanks to Panayot Butchvarov, Robin Jeshion, and Peter Murphy for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.