

In Defense of Pure Reason: A Rationalist Account of A Priori Justification, by Laurence Bonjour. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. xiv + 232. H/b £37.50, \$54.95, P/b £13.95, \$18.95.

Laurence Bonjour divides approaches to a priori justification into three kinds. Quine's *radical empiricism* denies the existence of any special category of a priori justification; *moderate empiricism* attempts to explain a priori justification in terms of something like knowledge of meaning or grasp of concepts; and *rationalism* postulates an irreducible 'rational insight' into the nature of reality. The positions therefore form a familiar trio of eliminativism, reductionism and anti-reductionism concerning a priori justification. Bonjour's interesting and (in the present philosophical climate) unusual project is to defend rationalism, the anti-reductionist position. Rationalism says that we have an ability to 'directly or intuitively see or grasp or apprehend ... a necessary fact about the nature or structure of reality' (pp. 15–16). 'An apparent rational insight,' he says, 'purports to be nothing less than a direct insight into the necessary character of reality' (p. 107). Two clarifications will help to mark out the distinctive character of this view: first, that rational insight is fallible; and second, that although Bonjour carefully distinguishes the concepts of necessity and apriority, he none the less claims that rational insight yields a priori knowledge of necessary truths only. On his view, the contingent a priori does not exist, although empirical necessities do.

Bonjour argues for his rationalism by first presenting arguments against both moderate and radical empiricism. He then describes the rationalist view, considers various objections to it, and ends with a chapter proposing a novel rationalist solution to the problem of induction. The critique of radical empiricism in chapter three is based on a discussion of Quine's views in 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism'. Bonjour thinks that it is only the last section of this paper which contains any really threat to rationalism; the first sections (on analyticity) only touch on the idea of a priori justification in so far as all a priori knowledge is knowledge of analytic truth (a moderate empiricist view). Since Quine is really arguing with Carnap in this paper and not with a Bonjour-style rationalist, this emphasis is not surprising. Bonjour finds the critique of analyticity unpersuasive, and the behaviourism and naturalism which underlie them question-begging. The epistemological arguments from the end of 'Two Dogmas' get similar treatment. The Duhemian picture of science sketched there tells against a priori justification only if it is assumed that 'epistemic rationality is concerned solely with adjusting one's beliefs to experience' (p. 76) and this is one of the questions at issue. The doctrine of the indeterminacy of translation is dismissed too as question-begging, and naturalized epistemology is charged with not being epistemology at all.

His final point, first touched on at the beginning of the book and returned to in this chapter, is that Quine's position on the a priori eventually gives rise to a general scepticism, since the epistemic justification for moving beyond propositions about mere sense-experience must ultimately depend on a priori

principles. BonJour makes an interesting point here about the dependence of empirical justification on a priori justification, but the point would surely have little force against someone who has turned his back so completely on traditional epistemology as Quine has done. BonJour does not seem to have fully appreciated the way in which Quine would simply reject the traditional epistemologist's talk of epistemic justification.

From a Quinean perspective, calling the Quinean approach 'question-begging' misses the point. Quine is not trying to present an argument for his radical conclusions from uncontroversial premisses; rather, he is using a variety of rhetorical and dialectical methods to persuade philosophers that their old ways of thinking are, in a certain way, empty. The essence of this challenge is not that 'analytic' or 'a priori' do not make any literal sense, or that they are wholly unintelligible. The point is rather that our knowledge will not be advanced by thinking in this traditional way; our scientific and other theories should select the concepts they need on pragmatic/empirical grounds, and the old concepts of a priori knowledge and epistemic justification have not yielded sufficient empirical/scientific or any other kind of epistemic fruit. So the Quinean urges that we do away with them, and replace them with something likely to be more fruitful. The Quinean certainly employs the idea of 'our knowledge', but need not be particularly insistent that it is all 'empirical' in the sense the rationalist intends (*pace* BonJour, p. 81). Rather, rejecting the a priori/empirical distinction involves rejecting both sides of the distinction as the rationalist and the moderate empiricist construe them. (This is the point Quine is making at the end of 'Carnap on Logical Truth' with the image of the 'pale grey fabric' of our knowledge, black with fact and white with convention, but containing no wholly white threads and no wholly black ones.)

I'm not saying that Quine is right and BonJour is wrong; it's just that calling Quine's approach 'question-begging' does not help us understand *what* is wrong with it. Quine challenged philosophers to think in a wholly different way about knowledge; to respond, 'But that's question-begging!' seems to misconstrue the kind of challenge being made. The underlying problem, I suspect, is that BonJour lacks sufficient sympathy with Quine's philosophy to be able to engage with it in a creative way. There is no real attempt to get inside the view and see what is at its heart and what is peripheral. Quine's views, BonJour says, are 'very difficult to take seriously' (p. 62); Quine has 'failed to fully appreciate the dialectical situation' (p. 64); his 'grasp of the main concepts and distinctions in this area ... is far from sure' (p. 64); and the arguments of 'Two Dogmas', when not 'loose and metaphorical' (p. 75) are 'totally lacking in force' (p. 77). What emerges is a picture of Quine's contribution to this debate as almost entirely worthless: a reader ignorant of Quine's views would be obliged to conclude that they were barely worth discussing. It seems to me that this is not the way to get the best out of a debate with one's philosophical opponents.

BonJour's discussion of Quine, then, is not one of the better parts of his

interesting book. So let us move on to the theory with which BonJour has just a little more sympathy, moderate empiricism. BonJour actually thinks that there is, strictly speaking, no one theory which counts as moderate empiricism, since there is a 'stunning diversity of distinct and not obviously compatible views' of the central concept, analyticity (p. 28). And he argues that when clarified, the notion of analyticity is either epistemologically irrelevant, or so unclear as to be beyond repair. He carefully distinguishes various things which have been meant by 'analytic', and concludes that even when the notions are not objectionable in themselves (for example, Frege's notion of analyticity) they are no help to epistemology.

Is BonJour right that there is no epistemologically workable conception of analyticity? Light has been shed on these matters by Paul Boghossian's 1996 paper, 'Analyticity Reconsidered' (*Noûs* 30, pp. 360–91). Boghossian distinguishes a metaphysical conception of analyticity—*truth* in virtue of meaning—from an epistemological conception—*justification* in virtue of knowledge of meaning. Boghossian and BonJour (p. 37) would agree that the metaphysical conception is hopeless; nothing can be true purely in virtue of what it means. But the epistemological conception is a different idea: this is the idea that one is justified in believing an analytic truth simply because one *knows* what the words it contains mean. One's knowledge of the meanings of one's words is part of what explains how one is justified in believing certain propositions. The approach then adopts Frege's definition of analyticity: a sentence is analytic when it can be transformed into a logical truth by the substitution of synonyms. If knowledge of synonymy is a priori, then all that needs to be explained is the apriority of knowledge of logical truth. Boghossian defends the idea that logical truths implicitly define the logical constants occurring therein, and therefore knowing a logical truth is knowing a definition, and thus can be a priori.

Obviously, many details need to be spelled out, and the project is not without its difficulties. But on the face of it, Boghossian's proposal is a challenge to BonJour's claim that there is no clear and epistemologically relevant conception of analyticity which is a candidate for doing the job of explaining a priori knowledge for the moderate empiricist. However, BonJour does argue that neither the idea of implicit definition nor the idea of knowledge of meaning can play any role in explaining a priori knowledge. He objects to the appeal to implicit definition on the grounds that one's knowledge that a sentence *S* is an implicit definition of term *T* occurring in it cannot explain one's justified belief in the truth of *S*, since this belief is presupposed in advance by the definition of *T* (pp. 50–1). And he further objects to the idea that knowledge of meaning can be used to explain a priori justification. 'Such a claim could only be defended,' he says, 'by giving some articulated account of just *how* justification is supposed to result solely from meaning' (p. 38). Later he says the mistake in the appeal to analyticity 'is to think that it conveys any epistemological insight into *how* the truth of the proposition is seen or grasped or appre-

hended' (p. 102). But how can it be *no* part of my justification for my belief that bachelors are unmarried that I know that 'bachelor' means *unmarried man*, and furthermore that this knowledge is, in the relevant sense, independent of experience? It is not clear why the moderate empiricist should not have the beginnings of an 'articulated account' here: the account of my justification for believing an a priori truth appeals in part to some further knowledge, the knowledge I have of the meanings of my words (or the concepts I possess). The account cannot, of course, stop there; it must also give an account of knowledge of meaning or possession of concepts, and this is a major task. But at least some of the outlines of an articulated epistemological account seem to be in place: explaining how we know certain propositions a priori in terms of how we know other things, the meanings of our words. Why does BonJour insist that this provides no epistemic illumination?

One reason might be that the moderate empiricist will ultimately have to appeal to something like an irreducible 'rational insight' into meanings or concepts, and it is this idea that is doing all the epistemological work. But even if this were so, it is not an objection to the idea that the a priori justification of *some* beliefs appeals to knowledge of meaning. For this is just an aspect of the familiar foundationalist picture that some beliefs are justified in terms of other beliefs, and at bottom there are some basic beliefs which are not justified in terms of any others. On the moderate empiricist's view, these are the beliefs about the meanings of our words. On BonJour's view, these are the truths we just see with our rational insight. The moderate empiricist can say that we know that nothing can be red and green all over ultimately because we know certain truths about the meanings of the words 'red' and 'green', etc.; the rationalist, on the other hand, says that we can 'just see' that it is necessarily true. (And the radical empiricist will say, in Quine's words, that 'there is no real difference between these two pseudo-doctrines'.)

An apparent advantage of the moderate empiricist picture as I have described it is that (like the foundationalist about empirical knowledge) it tries to tell a story about the structures or mechanisms by which we are justified in believing things. The appeal to rational insight, by contrast, seems to give out a little too soon. BonJour does a good job of persuading us that we should free ourselves of the prejudice that rational insight is 'mysterious'. But a genuinely articulated account should be able to say more about this insight than the relatively few remarks BonJour offers. For example, we are not told in any principled way *which* kinds of necessary truth can be justified by rational insight (except that not all of them can, given the existence of empirical necessities). It would be good to hear more from BonJour about the 'moving parts' of rational insight—especially given his conviction that knowledge of meaning contributes nothing to a priori justification. Without this, we can throw his question back to him: 'How exactly does rational insight contribute to a priori justification in the way that knowledge of meaning does not?'

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