

## REWRITING THE A PRIORI/A POSTERIORI DISTINCTION

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### ABSTRACT

The traditional way of drawing the a priori/a posteriori distinction, bequeathed to us by Kant, leads to overestimating the role that experience plays in justifying our beliefs. There is an irony in this: though Kant was in the rationalist camp, his way of drawing the distinction gives an unfair advantage to radical empiricism. I offer an alternative way of drawing the distinction, one that does not bias the rationalist/empiricist debate.

Rationalists claim that some of our beliefs are justified a priori. Radical empiricists deny this – they claim that all our justified beliefs are justified a posteriori. At the heart of this debate lies the a priori/a posteriori distinction. In Section 1 of what follows, I argue that the traditional way of drawing this distinction, which traces back to Kant, misleads us into overestimating the role that experience plays in justifying our beliefs. There is an irony in this: though Kant was in the rationalist camp, his way of drawing the distinction gives empiricism an unfair advantage. In Section 2, I offer another way of drawing the distinction, one that does not unfairly bias the rationalist/empiricist debate.

### I. AGAINST KANT

Kant draws the a priori/a posteriori distinction at the beginning of the *Critique*:

we shall understand by a priori knowledge, not knowledge independent of this or that experience, but knowledge absolutely independent of all experience. Opposed to it is empirical knowledge, which is knowledge possible only a posteriori, that is through experience. (Kant 1965: B3)

The dependency at stake is dependency for epistemic justification. A belief is justified a posteriori if it depends on experience for its justification; it is justified a priori if it does not depend on experience for its justification. Using contemporary terminology, a belief is justified a posteriori if it depends on experiential justifiers for its justification. A belief is justified a priori if it does not depend on experiential justifiers for its justification.

This way of drawing the distinction leads us to misclassify some beliefs. As we will see, there are three ways this can happen. In each case, the belief gets classified as a posteriori justified. This implies that experiential justifiers are playing the central role in justifying the belief. But, in each case, this is not so. Nonexperiential justifiers play an equally important role in justifying the belief. So while Kant's way of drawing the distinction makes it look like radical empiricism can accommodate these beliefs, it can't. Only a position that recognizes non-experiential justifiers – that is to say, only rationalism – can accommodate these beliefs.

The first case involves a specific kind of justified non-basic belief. The simplest example is of a belief that is based on two other justified beliefs, both of which are basic beliefs. Since they are basic beliefs, they are not dependent on other beliefs for their justification. One of these basic beliefs is a priori justified; it

owes its justification to a nonexperiential (non-doxastic) justifier. The other is a posteriori justified; it owes its justification to an experiential justifier. So the initial non-basic belief is ultimately justified by a non-experiential justifier and an experiential justifier. There are two ways this can happen. One I mention only to set aside. It involves epistemic overdetermination: this occurs when each justifier would suffice on its own, in the absence of the other justifier, to justify the non-basic belief. Set those cases aside. The cases I am interested in are ones in which neither the nonexperiential justifier nor the experiential justifier would suffice on its own, in the absence of the other, to justify the non-basic belief. In the absence of either justifier, one of the basic beliefs would be unjustified and, as a consequence, so too would the non-basic belief. The two justifiers function as *co-contributors*.

Let's now apply Kant's a priori/a posteriori distinction. The non-basic belief is dependent on an experiential justifier for its justification; so Kant has us classify it as a posteriori justified. Moreover, that belief fails to be independent of experience for its justification; for this reason, it is excluded from the a priori category. So Kant puts this belief squarely in the category of a posteriori justified beliefs. But, this belief is just as dependent on the nonexperiential justifier for its justification as it is on the experiential justifier. So classifying it as a posteriori justified is misleading.<sup>1</sup>

Consider an example. Saul Kripke advanced several examples of necessary propositions that, he claimed, are only knowable a posteriori.<sup>2</sup> Take Hesperus is

identical to Phosphorous, or  $H=P$ . Kripke claimed that  $H=P$  is necessarily true, or  $\Box(H=P)$ . Kripke argued that  $\Box(H=P)$  is only knowable a posteriori, on the grounds that the only route to knowing it via this argument:

- (1) If  $H=P$ , then  $\Box(H=P)$ .
- (2)  $H=P$ .
- (C)  $\Box(H=P)$ .

Kripke claimed to know (1) a priori, and to know (2) a posteriori. Working with Kant's distinction, he went on to classify his knowledge of (C) as a posteriori, since his justification for believing (C) is dependent on his justification for believing (2), which is experiential in nature. However, by labeling his justification for believing (C) a posteriori, Kripke failed to convey that a nonexperiential justifier played an equally important role in justifying this belief, a role played in the justification of his belief in (1).

The focus of the second case is a justified basic belief. As basic, this belief is not dependent on any other beliefs for its justification. Non-doxastic states justify this belief. In fact, two non-doxastic states justify it: one of these is experiential, while the other is non-experiential. Again, set aside the overdetermination cases. The case I am interested in is one in which either justifier would suffice on its own, without the other, to justify the belief. In the absence of either justifier, the belief would fail to be justified. Again, the experiential and nonexperiential justifier are functioning as epistemic co-contributors.

Let's apply Kant's distinction. Since the highlighted belief would not be justified if the experiential justifier were absent, the belief is dependent on an

experiential justifier for its justification. This puts it in the a posteriori category. This is further confirmed by the fact that the belief is excluded from the a priori category; this is because it fails to be independent of experience for its justification – remember the experiential justifier is needed. So on Kant's way of drawing the distinction, this belief falls squarely in the category of a posteriori justified beliefs. But, again, this is misleading. The nonexperiential justifier and the experiential justifier are epistemic co-contributors. They play equally important roles: the belief is just as dependent for its justification on the non-experiential justifier as it is on the experiential justifier.

Cases of this kind may not be plentiful, but they do occur. There are basic beliefs that rely for their justification on co-contributing experiential and nonexperiential justifiers. For example, a child's belief that  $4+3=7$  might be partly a priori justified by her intellectual insight that  $4+3=7$ , and partly a posteriori justified by her recent experience counting and recounting groups of blocks. Since she is relatively new to both kinds of exercises and she makes a good number of mistakes at each, neither episode would on its own be enough to justify her belief that  $4+3=7$ , but together they do. Likewise, a freshman logic student might have a marginally reliable a priori insight into DeMorgan's Rule; he might also base his belief in DeMorgan's Rule on his marginally reliable roommate's testimony that DeMorgan's Rule is true. Neither of these episodes would suffice on its own to justify his belief; but, together they do.

Where the first two kinds of cases make use of familiar kinds of justifiers (namely, beliefs and experiences), the third kind of case makes use of a less familiar, and more disputed, kind of justifier. For this reason, it is more controversial. Laurence Bonjour proposes that acts of inferring are a distinct kind of justifier. Bonjour maintains that a non-basic belief is justified only if *the inference* from the beliefs that it is based on is justified.<sup>3</sup> If this is right, there will be cases where the inference is justified one way and the relevant premise-beliefs are justified another way. Take, for example, a non-basic belief that is inferred from a basic belief. This basic belief is justified a posteriori and the inference from this belief to another belief is justified a priori. Again, suppose this is not an instance of overdetermination. Take away either the a posteriori justified belief or the a priori justified inference, and the person's conclusion-belief would be unjustified.

Since the conclusion-belief is dependent on an experiential justifier for its justification, Kant has us put it in the a posteriori category. It also fails to be independent of experience for its justification; this keeps it out of the a priori category. However, this too is misleading, since the belief is just as dependent for its justification on the nonexperiential justifier as it is on the experiential justifier.

Here is an example. Right now my experiences justify my belief that I am both tired and inspired. From this I infer that it is not the case that I am either well-rested or uninspired. My inference is justified because of an a priori insight that I have into its validity. In this case, my belief in the premise is a posteriori justified,

the act of inferring is a priori justified, and the subsequent inferred belief is justified by both the preceding experiential and nonexperiential elements.<sup>4</sup>

That gets us three kinds of cases where the Kantian way of drawing the a priori/a posteriori distinction has undesirable results. Each time, we are led to classify the relevant belief as a posteriori justified. This leads us to overestimate the role that experiential elements play in justifying these beliefs, and to underestimate the role that nonexperiential elements play. Since we end up classifying these beliefs as justified a posteriori, we naturally think of them as beliefs that radical empiricists can handle. But, in fact, because nonexperiential justifiers are just as crucial to their justification as experiential justifiers are, these beliefs really count against radical empiricism.

## II. THE REWRITE

The problem with Kant's way of drawing the distinction traces to an asymmetry. To be a posteriori justified, a belief only needs to *partially depend* on experiential justifiers. But to be a priori justified, it is not enough that a belief partially depend on nonexperiential justifiers for its justification – it must *exclusively depend* on nonexperiential justifiers.<sup>5</sup> So Kant requires a priori and a posteriori justified beliefs to stand in different dependency relations to their respective kinds of justifiers. He should not have injected this asymmetry. The a priori/a posteriori distinction is designed to help us keep tabs on experiential and nonexperiential justifiers.<sup>6</sup> On Kant's way of drawing the distinction, earning the

‘a priori label’ or the ‘a posteriori label’ requires that the respective kind of justifier be in place. But with a priori justified beliefs, the respective kind of justifier must be the only kind of justifier that is in play. But, in the other case, with a posteriori justified beliefs, the respective kind of justifier does not have to be the only kind of justifier in play.

We can avoid this asymmetry by making both kinds of justified beliefs depend exclusively on their respective kinds of justifiers. Here is how I propose to do this. First, we can continue to use the ‘a priori’ label for beliefs that are exclusively dependent on nonexperiential justifiers for their justification. We can then use the ‘a posteriori’ label more restrictively so that it only applies to beliefs that are *exclusively dependent* on experiential justifiers for their justification. A priori and a posteriori justified beliefs are now dependent in just the same way on their respective kinds of justifiers: each is *exclusively dependent* on their respective kind of justifier.<sup>7</sup> We can then introduce another label for beliefs that are not exclusively justified by either kind of justifier. These beliefs – for example, the ones I canvassed earlier – are justified by co-contributing experiential and nonexperiential justifiers. These beliefs should not be classified as either a posteriori justified or a priori justified. They should not be classified as a posteriori justified, since this would fail to convey the essential role that nonexperiential elements play in their justification. And they should not be classified as a priori justified, since this would not fail to convey the essential role that experiential

elements play in their justification. Instead, let's say they are justified in their own distinctive, *mixed manner*.<sup>8</sup>

Here is how the new labels connect with the main positions in the rationalist/empiricist debate. 'Radical empiricism' still stands for the view which denies that there are nonexperiential justifiers and insists that all justified beliefs are justified a posteriori. 'Radical rationalism' can stand for the (unpopular) view which denies that there are experiential justifiers and insists that all of our justified beliefs are justified a priori. Between these extremes are two moderate views. The label 'strong rationalism' can be used to stand for the view that some of our justified beliefs are a priori justified. The other view, call it 'weak rationalism', admits nonexperiential justifiers, but restricts their justifying power to beliefs that are justified in a mixed manner. On this view, nonexperiential justifiers co-contribute to the justification of some beliefs, but they do not have what it takes to justify beliefs on their own.

Most epistemologists do not subscribe to either radical rationalism or radical empiricism. Most, Kant included, subscribe to one of the moderate positions and recognize both a posteriori justified beliefs and a priori justified beliefs. Once one has made up their mind to be a moderate, the key remaining issue concerns the relative extent to which experiential and nonexperiential justifiers justify our beliefs. On Kant's approach, this issue is obscured, since it leads us to classify the beliefs that I profiled as a posteriori justified, thus hiding the important role that nonexperiential justifiers play in their justification.<sup>9</sup> By

classifying these beliefs in a third distinct category, we can more accurately measure the relative roles that experiential and nonexperiential justifiers play in justifying our beliefs. This helps us get a better handle on the key issue for moderates.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, it is misleading, not false. The same holds for the other two cases that I will discuss. That it is only misleading follows from the point made in note 7 below.

<sup>2</sup> See Kripke 1980: 102-105, 159-160.

<sup>3</sup> See Bonjour 1998: 4-6.

<sup>4</sup> This view requires that the insight into the validity of the inference not function as a premise belief. Perhaps, it is some non-doxastic state which disposes me to perform certain kinds of inferences.

<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere in the *Critique*, Kant asserts this asymmetry. For example at B3, “A priori modes of knowledge are entitled pure when there is *no* admixture of anything empirical” (my emphasis).

<sup>6</sup> For an extended discussion of the concepts of experiential and nonexperiential justifiers, see Casullo 2003: chapter 5.

<sup>7</sup> The other way to remove the asymmetry is to impose the weaker requirement that each kind of justified belief depend, whether exclusively or not, on their respective kind of justifier. Now the a priori and the a posteriori will not be mutually exclusive. For example, the beliefs that I traced will now come out as both a priori justified and a posteriori justified. One difficulty with this is that we can no longer infer from the fact that a belief is a posteriori justified, that empiricist resources can fully account for its justification. On the revision that I have proposed, this (highly useful) inference goes through.

<sup>8</sup> Beliefs based on overdetermining justifiers form another kind of mixed case. These beliefs do not *depend*, for example, on experiential justifiers for their justification. For if the experiential justifier were, say, defeated, the belief would remain justified. Notice that on Kant’s way of drawing the distinction, it follows

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that such a belief is a priori justified. This is problematic, since it misses the fact that there is an experiential justifier that plays just the same role that the nonexperiential justifier is playing. Since such a belief is misleadingly classified as a priori justified, it is now rationalism that is unfairly advantaged, and empiricism that is slighted.

<sup>9</sup> If the view that I dub weak rationalism is correct, Kant's approach conceals *all* nonexperiential justifiers.

<sup>10</sup> Thanks to Albert Casullo and two anonymous referees for helpful comments.

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