

***A Priori* Justification in Nietzsche**

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Abstract: This paper argues there are crucial points in Nietzsche's texts where he offers *a priori* epistemic justification for views he believes are correct. My reading contrasts with the dominant view that Nietzsche's philosophical naturalism is incompatible with *a priori* justification. My aim is to develop Nietzsche's brand of *a priori* justification, show that he employs this account of justification in the texts, and suggest how it might be compatible with naturalism.

Key words: 19th Century philosophy, epistemology, justification, *a priori*, naturalism

This paper argues there are crucial points in Nietzsche's texts where he offers *a priori* epistemic justification, that is, justification for views he believes are correct.¹ Readers even faintly familiar with Nietzsche should be immediately shocked by this reading. It seems fully divorced from Nietzsche's naturalist way of doing philosophy.

Indeed, Leiter holds that Nietzsche's naturalism repudiates "a philosophical solution to problems that proceed entirely *a priori*" (Leiter 2002: 3). Berry argues that a prominent feature of Nietzsche's naturalism is "a rejection of *a priori* methods of reasoning in favor of those that emulate the methods employed successfully in the natural sciences" (Berry 2010: 88, see also Kail 2015: 213). And Clark and Dudrick claim that "[Nietzsche] certainly rejects anything in such notions that is incompatible with what natural science tells us, or that can only be defended on *a priori* grounds" (Clark and Dudrick 2009: 249, see also 2006: 150-151).

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The reasoning behind these views is straightforward enough: naturalism ties justification to confirmation in experience, *a priori* justification is removed from experience, and thus appeals to the *a priori* violate naturalistic constraints on inquiry. Empiricist readings of Nietzsche, which tend to hold the stronger view that experience alone is conducive to knowledge, also divorce Nietzsche from the *a priori* (see Clark 1990: 247; Clark and Dudrick 2013; Hussain 2004a, 2004b). I focus my attention on naturalism here, though it will emerge that if my account is successful the empiricist position cannot be right.

If Nietzsche were to embrace *a priori* epistemic justification it would be quite significant. Nowhere in the literature do we find readers defending such a view. Commentators either (i) reject the approach at the outset by pitting naturalism or empiricism against *a priori* justification, as we have just seen; (ii) suggest that Nietzsche sometimes falls into offering *a priori* arguments against his better judgment (see Richardson 2004: 119, 60; Bailey 2013: 144); or (iii) pass over the matter completely while offering otherwise careful examinations of his epistemology (see, e.g., Anderson 1998; 2005). I think these treatments of Nietzsche's relation to the *a priori* leave a significant gap in the attempt to understand how Nietzsche justifies his preferred philosophical positions. My plan is to argue that Nietzsche embraces *a priori* epistemic justification and that his position is compatible with naturalism.

The paper unfolds as follows. I begin by describing a particular account of *a priori* justification and arguing that Nietzsche appeals to this kind of warrant in the texts. I focus on Nietzsche's treatment of the *causa sui*—the position that something can be the cause of itself. Nietzsche vehemently rejects the *causa sui*, and he does so on *a priori* grounds. This discussion will lead me to explain how Nietzsche's view of *a priori* justification might be compatible with

naturalism. I close by briefly mentioning additional examples of positions that Nietzsche rejects on *a priori* grounds in order to show that the example of the *causa sui* is not anomalous. If all goes to plan, the paper has the potential to make us rethink Nietzsche's methodology—specifically, how he warrants rejecting certain philosophical views that he wants us to overcome.

The Conceptual Account of *A Priori* Justification

When Nietzsche justifies views *a priori*, I suggest, he does so by appealing to what is called the *conceptual account of a priori* justification (or warrant—I use these interchangeably). This position is rooted in Kant's view of analyticity (1998: A6/B10) and has recently been revised and defended by Jenkins (2008; 2012). In this section I explain some of the view's key features and show that it qualifies as a legitimate *a priori* position.

The conceptual account holds that *a priori* justification consists in how our concepts relate to one another. *A priori* warrant of the proposition 'All crows are birds', for example, concerns how <crow>, that is, the concept crow, relates to <bird>, that is, the concept bird. Contemporary epistemologists locate the relation in *meaning* (see, e.g., Bonjour 1998: 38; Field 2000; 2006: 85). The conceptual account holds that once the meanings of certain terms in a relevant proposition are correctly grasped, justification rests solely on understanding that proposition. Correctly grasping <crow> can justify 'All crows are birds', for example, since the meaning of the word 'crow', which expresses <crow>, includes <bird>. By contrast, merely grasping <crow> is not by itself sufficient to justify 'All crows are delightful', given that <crow> does not include <delightful>. Hence this proposition is not warranted *a priori*.

The biggest challenge to the conceptual account is that it cannot properly justify propositions because the way things are with our concepts seems to be no guarantee for the way the world is. Justification that informs truth requires that we go beyond warrant at the level of our concepts and engage the nature of reality.

The worry can be made clear when we consider a three-step schematic of belief formation offered by Jenkins (2012: 182-187). The schematic is meant to be a general, simplified account of how we form beliefs. First, there is an *input* step. We receive sensory information from the world. The nature and structure of such sensory information is not important here. What is important is merely the fact that we *sense something*, and that something appears to come from the external world. Second, there is a *processing* step. The information we receive is processed by our cognitive apparatus. This processing might involve structuring, organizing, simplifying, extrapolating, and so on. Third, there is a *belief-formation* step. Information received and processed somehow leads us to form a belief. An easy example will suffice to illustrate these steps. When we open our eyes our visual receptors receive information that is then processed by our cognitive systems, such as the visual cortex, and this leads us to form beliefs about what we see.

The worry with the conceptual account is that *a priori* justification appears to omit the input step. Justifying beliefs merely by way of relations between the content of our concepts seems to have no connection to the way the world actually is. There are four ways to deal with this difficulty. The first is to deny the need for an input step when it comes to *a priori* justification, perhaps because *a priori* justification is innate. The second is to say that there is a non-experiential input step, such as pure rational intuition. The third is to endorse an

experiential input step and somehow retain the rights to call the account *a priori*. And the fourth is to admit defeat and deny *a priori* justification.

I contend below that Nietzsche goes with the third option: he thinks an experiential step grounds *a priori* warrant. When he writes, “All credibility, all good conscience, all evidence of truth come only from the senses” (BGE 134), I take him to mean that, at least in part, justification derives from being in causal contact with the sensible world. Such causal contact grounds experience, whether thinking or sensing. Justification comes from being in causal contact with sensory information. But, importantly, justification is not *identified* with sensory information. The causal relation is not justificatory, but merely genetic. Causal contact with the sensible world is the origin of our beliefs, including, at an advanced level, beliefs about the meanings of our terms. Justification then consists in certain relations between the meanings of our terms.

What kind of experience is needed for warrant? Whatever is *minimally sufficient* to grasp the meanings of our terms (for a defense of this position, see Russell 2017, especially Sections 3 and 4). On the conceptual account, *a priori* justification is independent of all experience beyond what is needed to grasp the relevant concepts involved in some proposition. The exact nature of what constitutes minimally sufficient experience might be tricky to pin down, but it can likely be delineated once the relevant context of meaning is set—once we establish that we are talking about crows, triangles, molecules, etc.

There are four good reasons to suppose that this view licenses the *a priori* label. First, it would be strange to think that we might be able to understand the meanings of our terms with no experience whatsoever—with no thought and no sensation. If we define *a priori* justification

as independent of *all* experience, then it is not clear that anything can be justified *a priori*. Nothing seems to remain once experience is completely removed.

Second, on the conceptual account experience is limited to playing a genetic role at the input step. Justification exclusively concerns belief-formation. Forming beliefs merely by reflecting on the meanings of our terms can occur independently of experience.

Third, reflecting on the meanings of our terms is certainly much different from the familiar kind of gathering evidence from the world. On this view we are not substantiating positions by looking out the window, fact-checking testimony, formulating and testing hypotheses, curve-fitting data, devising explanatory models, and the like. We are simply checking to see what our concepts mean, more or less from the armchair.

Fourth, the conceptual account allows us to retain important contrasts that have long thought to provide a legitimate space for the *a priori*. For instance, the account contrasts with classical empiricism, which holds that experience alone provides epistemic justification. The account also contrasts with *a posteriori* justification, understood here as warrant substantiated by all possible experience, from exploring the deep recesses of Mars to visualizing the passage of ionizing radiation in cloud chambers. The conceptual account only allows for non-justificatory, minimally sufficient experience. Not all experience is allowed to play a role. Countenancing some experience can certainly be legitimately separated from countenancing all possible experience. Thus *a priori* justification can exist independently of *a posteriori* justification.

It is crucial to notice that on the conceptual account I have presented *a priori* reasoning is defeasible. The view need not be taken to support truths that could not be otherwise, against

a view someone like Hume might advance. It is possible that what appears to be *a priori* warrant can be undermined by certain evidence, specifically evidence that challenges the established meanings of our terms. Such evidence could be given in sense experience. If sense experience in the future reveals that crows are not birds, for instance, the proposition 'All crows are birds' would not be justified. Merely grasping the proposition would not justify the proposition. In this case, we would have reason to alter the meaning of 'crow', similar to how we altered the meaning of 'whale' after the 18th century due to discoveries regarding fish and mammals. Once systems of meaning are established, we can make *a priori* claims about the world. Nothing about the conceptual account must rule out the possibility of overriding justifications given the establishment of new meanings.

One last thing before moving on. Those familiar with Nietzsche know that he appears hostile to Kant's epistemology. In particular, Nietzsche rejects synthetic *a priori* judgments. He claims they are "the falsest judgments" (BGE 4, see also 11). Does this imply that he rejects the conceptual account? It does not. For Kant synthetic *a priori* judgments go beyond the mere content of non-empirical concepts like <substance> and <causality> to make substantive empirical claims about the way the world is. On the conceptual account the world provides information that contributes to determining the meaning of our empirical concepts. Neither of these implies the truth or falsity of the other—they are simply different. For instance, justifying synthetic *a priori* judgments requires non-empirical concepts, whereas justification on the conceptual account requires no such thing. Justification on the conceptual account turns entirely on relations between empirical concepts, and we know Nietzsche thinks all concepts are empirical. For reasons like these—and this is just one difference between the two—it looks

like Nietzsche's dismissal of the synthetic *a priori* does not undermine the account of *a priori* justification given here.

The *Causa Sui*

In this section I contend that a key commitment in Nietzsche's thinking is justified *a priori*. I have in mind his attack on the *causa sui*, the idea that something is the cause of itself. Here is what he has to say about the *causa sui*: the "*causa sui*" is a "contradictory concept" (PT 16); "the concept of a *causa sui* is something thoroughly absurd" (BGE 15); and "the *causa sui* is the best self-contradiction that has ever been conceived, a type of rape and perversion of logic" (BGE 21, my translation). There is one more mention in the published texts (TI "Reason" 4), but his challenge there is less obvious, so I focus on the above remarks.

Importantly, the attacks Nietzsche launches against the *causa sui* are perfectly general. The passages where the term is mentioned target very different philosophical ideas—PT 16 is directed at the nature of motion in relation to Anaxagoras's *nous*, BGE 15 addresses a phenomenalist version of idealism, and BGE 21 examines free will—but Nietzsche's rejection of the *causa sui* stands apart from these specific contexts. That is, he is independently committed to the absurdity of the *causa sui*. And, crucially, this commitment is central to understanding his philosophical program at large. It informs his view of physics (motion), metaphysics (motion, idealism, free will), epistemology (idealism), philosophy of action (motion, free will), moral psychology (free will), and ethics (free will).

So, why does Nietzsche reject the *causa sui*? Strangely, he never offers any reason. He provides no arguments for his claims. He simply assumes readers will follow him on account of

what he asserts. Unfortunately, the secondary literature fares no better. It is standard to find commentators simply repeating what Nietzsche says—for instance, that the *causa sui* is a contradiction, or absurd, or nonsense—without explaining why we are supposed to accept what he says as true (see Solomon 2003: 182; Pippin 2011: 69-70; Welshon 2009: 27; Janaway 2011: 62; Leiter 2011: 113-114, 2015: 70-72; Clark and Dudrick 2012: 102; Gemes and Janaway 2006: 347; Strawson 2015: 12; Tubert 2015; Katsafanas 2014: 189-192, 2016: 139, 218; Ridley 2018: 90-97). I want to know *why* Nietzsche holds this view.

It might seem reasonable to assume that Nietzsche's position finds support in the best sciences of his day. Perhaps the rejection of the *causa sui* can be traced back to what has been established by some scientific undertaking upon careful observation of the world. The naturalist reading of Nietzsche's account of justification would take this route. But this reading faces a lack of evidence. As far as I have found, the history of science from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century has nothing to say about the *causa sui*. Of course, one can always speculate about what the sciences *might* say. But it looks like there was nothing for Nietzsche to appeal to in the sciences of his day that might help explain his view. As a result, the naturalist approach does not help us understand Nietzsche's position.

Perhaps we can understand Nietzsche's view by turning to positions defended by key figures in the history of philosophy who influenced his writings on causality. Nietzsche praises Spinoza, for instance, for his rejection of free will, and Spinoza has much to say about the *causa sui*. The problem is that Spinoza fully *embraces* the notion. For Spinoza all events in the world develop from God's nature and are ultimately identical to God. This does not help us understand Nietzsche's position. In fact, Spinoza's endorsement of the *causa sui*, together with

Nietzsche's praise of Spinoza on free will, might provide evidence that Nietzsche is actually *sympathetic* to the *causa sui*. This is not what we want.

What about Nietzsche's influences in the Kantian tradition? In *Grundprobleme der Erkenntnisthätigkeit* (1876), Otto Caspari rejects the *causa sui* for the reason that it requires appeal to some non-empirical realm. Caspari calls this realm the "übercausal." But this again does not seem to be Nietzsche's position. Nietzsche frequently attacks non-empirical worlds, from Plato's Forms to Kant's thing in itself (see, e.g., TI "World"). If he were adopting Caspari's approach we would then expect him to denounce the *causa sui* on non-empirical grounds, just as Caspari does. Yet Nietzsche's remarks on the *causa sui* say nothing about anything non-empirical. So we need to look elsewhere.

We might do better by looking to Kant. In the *Nova Dilucidatio*, Kant writes:

It is impossible that anything should have the reason of its own existence in itself. For whatever contains in itself the reason of the existence of something is the cause of that thing. If, therefore, it be affirmed that there is something which has the reason of its existence in itself, then that entity would be the cause of itself. But since the notion of cause is in nature prior to the notion of the thing caused, and the latter posterior to the former, the same thing would be at the same time prior to and posterior to itself. And that is absurd (Kant 1968: 223).

Kant denies that anything can be the cause of its own existence. Nietzsche's claim that the *causa sui* is "thoroughly absurd" (BGE 15) matches Kant's vocabulary. However, it is hard to

believe this is more than coincidence. We have no evidence that Nietzsche was familiar with this particular pre-critical work by Kant, which was written in 1755. Of course, this does not mean that Nietzsche was in the dark, but it would be a stretch to hang Nietzsche's familiarity of Kant's pre-critical, less-known position on a single, generic phrase.

Regardless, Kant's argument against the *causa sui* does seem to adopt some form of the conceptual account of the *a priori*. For Kant no experience beyond what is necessary to grasp the relevant concepts is required to warrant the idea that something cannot be both prior to itself and posterior to itself. Once one understands concepts like <prior>, <posterior>, and <cause>, Kant's argument seems straightforwardly justified. I think a similar kind of justification can be found in Nietzsche.

We get closest with Schopenhauer, I think, who was clearly indebted to Kant. In *On the Fourfold Root and the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, Schopenhauer attacks Spinoza's use of the *causa sui*, which, Schopenhauer claims, derives from Descartes (for evidence that Schopenhauer is correct about this origin, see Melamed forthcoming). Spinoza's "ontological proof," Schopenhauer writes, "taught that the *existentia* of God is a consequence of the *essentia* of God," a move which renders God "*causa sui*" (Schopenhauer 2017: §8). Schopenhauer rejects this view: "I see nothing but a *contradictio in adjecto* in this same *causa sui*, a before that is after, an audacious command to us, to sever arbitrarily the eternal causal chain" (Schopenhauer 2017: §8).

This appears to be an *a priori* argument that turns on connecting causation to time. The typical understanding of <cause> and <effect> is that a cause comes temporally prior the effect. To say that something is the cause of itself, however, is to deny this temporal relation. So the

meaning of the *causa sui* is a “*contradictio in adjecto*,” or a contradiction in terms. It is “a before that is after.” To embrace the *causa sui* is “to sever arbitrarily the eternal causal chain,” or the chain of linking effects to prior causes backwards in time without end.

There are two ways in which Schopenhauer’s language and reasoning appear to have influenced Nietzsche. The first is that Schopenhauer closes his discussion by remarking that “The right emblem for *causa sui* is Baron Münchhausen, sinking on horseback into the water, clinging by the legs to his horse and pulling both himself and the animal out by his own pigtail, with the motto underneath: *Causa sui*” (Schopenhauer 2017: §8). Nietzsche mentions Münchhausen in BGE 21 when disregarding the *causa sui*. This could be coincidence, given that the tale of Münchhausen was well-known in German culture, but there is a second piece of evidence. In BGE 21 Nietzsche also calls the *causa sui* a “*contradiction*.” The contradiction Nietzsche points out has nothing to do with temporality, or some “eternal causal chain,” but Schopenhauer’s remarks do seem to have made an impression on Nietzsche.

Where does this leave us? We cannot fully understand why Nietzsche rejects the *causa sui* by looking to the natural sciences or by examining the views of those who discuss the notion in his immediate philosophical context. His rejection of the *causa sui* remains unexplained. I think an explanation is relatively easy to find, despite the fact that it has never been offered. This lapse is no doubt due in part to the dominant influence of the naturalist reading. Let me now turn to Nietzsche’s view.

The Absurdity of the *Causa Sui*

Nietzsche proceeds as if merely grasping the *concept* of the *causa sui* is enough to warrant its absurdity. Indeed, he primarily attacks the *causa sui* on conceptual grounds. The concept of the *causa sui* means something like ‘cause of itself’, or ‘self-caused’, or ‘its own cause’. Nietzsche calls this a “contradictory *concept*” (PT 16, my emphasis) and asserts that “the *concept* of a *causa sui* is something thoroughly absurd” (BGE 15, my emphasis). How might we make sense of these claims?

The conceptual account of *a priori* warrant can help. The concept of the *causa sui* entails that there is no distinction between cause and effect—that whatever constitutes the content of <cause> is not distinct from whatever constitutes the content of <effect>. ‘Distinct’ can be understood qualitatively or numerically. Spinoza, for instance, holds that God is the cause of God and God is nature, such that God is neither qualitatively nor numerically distinct from nature. The concept of the *causa sui*, notice, also involves the concept of causation. If something is the cause of itself, it involves causation. Intuitively, however, the concept of causation entails that causes are distinct from effects—that whatever constitutes the content of <cause> is somehow distinct from whatever constitutes <effect>. The concept of the *causa sui* is therefore a “contradictory concept,” a “self-contradiction,” or “a type of logical rape.” <Causa sui> denies a distinction between cause and effect, but <causai sui> involves <causation>, and <causation> affirms such a distinction.

Understanding why the *causa sui* is a “contradictory concept” merely depends on grasping the concept of the *causa sui*. To grasp <causa sui>, we must grasp <causation>, but once we grasp <causation>, we see that <cause sui> is a contradiction. No experience beyond

what is needed to grasp the ordinary meaning of causality is required to justify such absurdity. We do not need to appeal to Newtonian physics, for example, or any substantive theory about the workings of the empirical world. We might merely witness, for instance, a cue ball knocking a nine ball into a corner pocket. Experiential input is minimal. And notice that we do not witness the nine ball sinking itself into the corner pocket, or the cue ball moving to strike the nine ball on its own. Of course, this all might depend on putting aside Hume's skeptical worries about causality. But even Hume regards events we associate with cause and effect to be distinct, and that is all Nietzsche needs. I suggest below why Nietzsche thinks we can justifiably regard constantly conjoined events as genuine instances of causality.

As soon as we have what little experience is required to grasp the meaning of something being the cause of itself we should immediately see that the notion is problematic. This seems to be why Nietzsche finds the *causa sui* straightforwardly wrongheaded. It therefore appears that the attack on the *causa sui* is an example of *a priori* justification. Nietzsche thinks that merely grasping the concept of the *causa sui* justifies the claim that "The concept of a *causa sui* is something thoroughly absurd" (BGE 15).

The *Causa Sui* and Naturalism

Is the account I have given compatible with naturalism? As I see things, any naturalist reading of Nietzsche should hold that warrant can be grounded in or substantiated by *any possible experience*, given that the proper space of investigation of the sciences typically concerns whatever can be encountered in experience. Hence the naturalist should hold that for

Nietzsche justification is *a posteriori* rather than *a priori*. My account is therefore importantly different from the naturalist account.

And it is something new. To my mind, no one in the literature holds that for Nietzsche justification can be gained simply by understanding the meaning of our terms. In fact, recent work suggests that for Nietzsche simply grasping the meanings of our terms is not nearly enough to establish any sort of justification. Huddleston (2018), for instance, has recently argued that Nietzsche challenges the longstanding Platonic view that substantive knowledge can be gained merely by grasping what we take to be the necessary and sufficient application conditions of our concepts. My account is certainly not Platonic, but it does allow for justification merely at the conceptual level.

There is something crucial to add. I suggested above that the conceptual account of *a priori* justification can admit possible defeaters. The conceptual account allows for Nietzsche's rejection of the *causa sui* to be wrong. If experience were to show that something can be the cause of itself, or if science were to reveal that the *causa sui* is a perfectly legitimate way of understanding certain natural phenomena, then we might think the meaning of the *causa sui* is perfectly sensible. Consequently, Nietzsche's view might be contested and perhaps overturned. The conceptual account of *a priori* justification offered here is open to this possibility, which effectively renders the account consistent with naturalism.

This conclusion has significant implications. If my reading is accurate, then it is incorrect to think that justification based on what the sciences tell us is "incompatible" with *a priori* justification (Clark and Dudrick 2009: 249). Nietzsche emphasizes the genetic role sense experience plays in contributing to justification, but he also offers warrant based strictly on the

meanings of our terms. As a result, it is a mistake to say that Nietzsche rejects philosophical solutions that are “entirely” *a priori* (Leiter 2002: 3). Justification based solely on the meanings of our terms is entirely *a priori*. The meaning of our terms should not be divorced from experience, of course, but if my account is correct this does not entail that for Nietzsche justification is *a posteriori* or bust.

The *Causa Sui* and Common Sense

Let me quickly address a possible objection. Nietzsche says many complex things about causality—sometimes even seemingly strange things. For this reason, it might be hard to believe that he would make an *a priori* argument that relies on how we *ordinarily* understand causation, namely, that causation consists in two distinct events in the role of cause and effect. Nietzsche, if anything, is a denier of the ordinary and the easily-observed. To be sure, nothing about the conceptual account of *a priori* justification requires appeal to commonsense conceptions of the world. But the worry should be clear enough.

Although this is not the place to launch a thorough examination of Nietzsche’s view of causality, I have argued elsewhere that he embraces a *constructivist* conception of causation (see [redacted]). According to this position, causal events are constitutively dependent on human interpreters in the sense that we individuate events into cause and effect when attempting to understand the world in experience (see also Putnam 1983).

Consider some textual evidence for this view. Nietzsche claims that “an intellect that saw cause and effect as a continuum, not, as we do, as arbitrary division and dismemberment—that saw the stream of the event—would reject the concept of cause and effect” (GS 112). To

deny causality is to deny individuation between cause and effect. Causality, then, requires such individuation—it requires “division and dismemberment” on the part of human interpreters. Indeed, as Nietzsche says directly in his notes, “There is no event in itself. What happens is a group of phenomena selected and synthesized by an interpreting being” (KSA 12:1[115]). Constructivism concerning causality even seems to make an appearance in BGE 21, a passage where Nietzsche rejects the *causa sui*. Nietzsche explains that cause and effect are “conventional fictions for the purpose of designation and communication,” adding that “it is we alone who have devised cause.”

Here is why this reading of Nietzsche on causality is important in light of the current discussion. The constructivist conception of causality, just like the commonsense conception, involves a distinction between cause and effect, and some distinction or other is all Nietzsche requires for his argument against the *causa sui*. Consequently, Nietzsche’s appeal to the commonsense conception of causality when challenging the *causa sui* is not undermined by his more sophisticated remarks of the nature of causation. And this conclusion allows us to continue to read Nietzsche as a denier of the ordinary—constructivism, of course, is quite far from ordinary!

Further Examples

I have argued that Nietzsche’s rejection of the *causa sui* is justified *a priori*. This conclusion should be substantial enough to challenge the predominant readings of his approach to justification, and, as I mentioned, Nietzsche’s rejection of the *causa sui* plays a key role in understanding many different facets of his philosophical agenda, from metaphysics to moral

psychology. As I see things, then, establishing that Nietzsche embraces *a priori* justification by focusing on the *causa sui* has deep merit.

Are there other examples of the conceptual account of *a priori* justification in Nietzsche's texts? I think so, yes. The clearest examples come from BGE 16:

But I will say this a hundred times: "immediate certainty," like "absolute knowledge" and the "thing in itself" contains a *contradictio in adjecto*." For once and for all, we should free ourselves from the seduction of words! (for immediate certainty, cf. BGE 281; for absolute knowledge, cf. GM III: 12; for thing in itself, cf. GS 54; TI "World").

"*Contradictio in adjecto*," as we saw above, means a contradiction in terms, specifically a self-contradiction. Recall that Schopenhauer employs this phrase when offering an *a priori* argument against Spinoza's use of the *causa sui*. Nietzsche uses it here to reject immediate certainty, absolute knowledge, and the thing in itself. He finds each of these three notions, which form the basis of extremely influential positions in the history of philosophy, conceptually incoherent. He writes as if merely having enough experience to grasp the meaning of such terms provides sufficient reason to reject them on the grounds that they are self-contradictory. The likeness between this argument and Nietzsche's dismissal of the *causa sui* is undeniable: self-contradictory concepts should be rejected. There is therefore good reason to suppose that Nietzsche's challenges in BGE 16 are justified *a priori*.

How might his arguments against immediate certainty, absolute knowledge, and the thing in itself play out? I can only speculate here—this is not the place to get into the weeds on

these issues. The concept of immediate certainty, which Descartes believes is required for genuine knowledge, appears contradictory because knowledge is always mediated. As Nietzsche remarks, knowledge claims never grasp objects in a “stark naked” manner (BGE 16). Mediating factors might include certain philosophical assumptions, which Nietzsche goes on to describe in BGE 16, or perhaps interpretive, perspectival, and affective forces, which he famously describes elsewhere (see GM III: 12). The concept of absolute knowledge, which appears to be non-perspectival, looks contradictory because knowledge is necessarily perspectival (see GM III: 12). And the concept of the thing in itself appears contradictory because things are ontologically dependent on other things while the thing in itself is supposed to be ontologically independent of other things (see KSA 12:2[85], 12:10[202]). Nietzsche’s attack on these three notions seems to be warranted by reflection on Nietzsche’s alternative conceptions of knowledge and thinghood.

Summary and Conclusion

I have argued that Nietzsche relies on what is now called the conceptual account of *a priori* epistemic justification to warrant his rejection of certain philosophical ideas. Commentators have long thought that he pays no mind to *a priori* justification given that such warrant appears incompatible with his commitment to naturalism. If my reading is plausible, however, Nietzsche not only defends certain views in a wholly *a priori* manner, but his account of *a priori* justification is actually compatible with naturalism. The conceptual account locates justification in relations between the meanings of our terms and naturalist inquiry can reveal

information that can act as defeaters to accepted meanings. This complicates a longstanding naturalist dogma in Nietzsche scholarship—and, I hope, for the better.

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