The contingent a priori and the publicity of a priori knowledge

Daniel Z. Korman

Abstract   Kripke maintains that one who stipulatively introduces the term 'one meter' as a rigid designator for the length of a certain stick s at time t is in a position to know a priori that if s exists at t then the length of s at t is one meter. Some (e.g., Soames 2003) have objected to this alleged instance of the contingent a priori on the grounds that the stipulator's knowledge would have to be based in part on substantive metalinguistic knowledge. I examine Soames's argument for the a posteriority of the relevant metalinguistic knowledge, and I argue that its main premise is false.

1 The meter proposition and the 'meter' proposition

Saul Kripke famously argued that some truths are both contingent and knowable a priori. For instance, one who stipulatively introduces the term 'one meter' as a rigid designator for the length of a certain stick s at time t is said to be in a position to know a priori that if s exists at t then the length of s at t is one meter.[1] Call this *the meter proposition*. Many were not convinced by this example or by any of Kripke's other examples. There are two main sources of dissent. The first has to do with the stipulator's lack of acquaintance with the length in question which, in one way or another, is meant to prevent the stipulator from knowing the meter proposition.[2]

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[1] Kripke (1980, pp. 54-7).

[2] More cautiously, the idea is that either the stipulator is not acquainted with the length and therefore cannot know the meter proposition or the stipulator *is* acquainted with the length and in that case acquires only a posteriori knowledge of the meter proposition.

D. Z. Korman (✉)
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 606 West John St, Champaign 61820, IL, USA
e-mail: dzkorman@gmail.com

Nathan Salmon, for instance, contends that the stipulator's lack of acquaintance with that length prevents her from knowing (de re) of that length that it is the length of s at t, from which it is meant to follow that she cannot know (de dicto) that the length of s at t is one meter.[3] If this line of reasoning is sound, then the stipulator cannot know the meter proposition at all, let alone know it a priori.

The second source of dissent has to do with the epistemic status of associated semantic knowledge. The stipulator's knowledge of the meter proposition would arguably have to be based on her knowledge that the term 'one meter' refers in her language to the length of an object iff the length of that object is one meter. Call this further proposition *the 'meter' proposition*. The question of whether the meter proposition can be known a priori therefore turns on the question of whether the 'meter' proposition can be known a priori—but the latter, some would say, is substantive semantic information which can be known only a posteriori.[4]

2 The publicity argument

My focus here will be this second sort of strategy for resisting Kripke's examples. (Robin Jeshion argues persuasively against the first sort of strategy in her 2001 and 2006, which remain unchallenged in the literature.) Apart from the sort of acquaintance-based arguments that I am setting aside for the purposes of this paper,[5] the only argument I am aware of for the a posteriority of this sort of semantic knowledge is an argument from the lack of publicity of the alleged a priori knowledge. Scott Soames, for instance, denies that the 'meter' proposition and related propositions (e.g., that the word 'rabbit' refers in my language to an object iff that object is a rabbit) can be known a priori on the following grounds: "If they could be so known, then non-English speakers should be able to know them simply by reflecting on and reasoning about them."[6]

Soames seems to have in mind something like the following argument (to be charitably modified below):

(P1) Some non-English speakers understand the 'meter' proposition but cannot know it simply by reflecting on and reasoning about it.

(P2) A proposition p can be known a priori only if anyone who understands p can come to know p simply by reflecting on and reasoning about it.

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[3] Salmon (1988, pp. 200-1); cf. Donnellan (1977). Scott Soames argues that the lack of acquaintance prevents the stipulator even from successfully fixing the reference of 'one meter' (Soames 2003, pp. 410-3).

[4] See, e.g., Levin (1975, p. 152, n.2) and Soames (2003, 408f). Cf. Chalmers (2002, p. 170).

[5] See Salmon (1988, p. 200, n.10); Jeshion's aforementioned criticisms apply here as well. One might try to argue that the stipulator's knowledge of the 'meter' proposition must be a posteriori on the grounds that the stipulator must know that she had engaged in an act of stipulation in order to know the 'meter' proposition, and the former can be known only on the basis of introspection. But even granting that introspective knowledge is a posteriori, this would seem to be a paradigm case of a posteriori knowledge playing an enabling (as opposed to evidential) role, in which case it doesn't threaten the a priority of her knowledge of the 'meter' proposition.

[6] Soames (2003, pp. 408-9).

(C) So the 'meter' proposition cannot be known a priori.

The reasoning behind P1 is straightforward: just as monolingual English speakers can understand the proposition that the term 'un mètre' refers in French to the length of an object iff the length of that object is one meter without being in any position to know whether it is true or false, monolingual French speakers can understand the 'meter' proposition without being in any position to know whether it is true or false.

The second premise, however, is in need of some revision. First, it must be restricted to suitably intelligent individuals; otherwise, mathematical truths that cannot be understood by children (because they are too complex) would turn out to be a posteriori even for mathematicians who have seen the proofs. Second, its consequent must be modalized, lest the (violent or pedagogical) elimination of non-English speakers invalidate the argument. Third, the modalized consequent must be restricted to worlds in which p is true; otherwise, worlds in which the Princeton proposition is false but understood by suitably intelligent beings (and, as we will see, there *are* such worlds) will serve as counterexamples. P2 should therefore be replaced with P2′:

(P2′) A proposition p can be known a priori only if, necessarily, if p is true then anyone who understands p and is suitably intelligent can come to know p simply by reflecting on and reasoning about it.

P1 must be revised accordingly to secure the validity of Soames's publicity argument:

(P1′) It is possible for the 'meter' proposition to be true and for there to be suitably intelligent non-English speakers who understand it but cannot know it simply by reflecting on and reasoning about it.

3 Against the publicity constraint

One problem with P2′ is that it straightforwardly begs the question against Kripke. P2′ in effect proclaims that a priori knowledge must be public: if anyone can know it a priori then everyone can know it a priori. But part of what drives Kripke's contention that the meter proposition and related propositions can be known a priori is the observation that the stipulator is in a privileged epistemic position. So no argument that employs a premise like P2′ can be expected to convince one who is moved by Kripke's examples.

More importantly, P2′ can be shown to be false. To see how, let us turn our attention to a far less controversial instance of the contingent a priori. Soames himself agrees—and argues persuasively—that it is both contingent and a priori that if actually Princeton has a philosophy department then Princeton has a philosophy department.[7] Call this *the Princeton proposition*. The argument for the contingency of the Princeton proposition is straightforward. Its antecedent is true in all worlds—

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[7] Soames (2003, 2007, §6).

including those worlds in which Princeton has no philosophy department—since it is true even in those worlds that Princeton has a philosophy department in our world. But in those worlds, the consequent of the Princeton proposition is false and, accordingly, the conditional as a whole is false. So the Princeton proposition is contingent. The argument for its a priority is equally straightforward, for one can know a priori, of any proposition that one entertains, that it is true iff true in one's own world.[8]

But P2′, together with the following premise P1″, entails that the Princeton proposition cannot be known a priori:

> (P1″) It is possible for the Princeton proposition to be true and for there to be suitably intelligent individuals who understand it but who cannot know it simply by reflecting on and reasoning about it.

P1″ is true. The possible individuals in question will be inhabitants of a world other than our own in which Princeton has a philosophy department. Call them *the Aliens*. In order for the Aliens to understand the Princeton proposition—which is, in part, a proposition about our world—they have to be able to think about our world. Singling out another world in thought is no small feat, but we may suppose that their mental capacities far exceed our own and that they are able to get our world uniquely in mind by imagining it in full detail.[9] They nevertheless will not be in a position to know the Princeton proposition simply by reflecting on and reasoning about it. For although the Aliens can know that its antecedent (which is true in their world iff Princeton has a philosophy department in *our* world) is true simply by reflecting on and reasoning about it, they cannot know that its consequent (which is true in their world iff Princeton has a philosophy department in *their* world) is true simply by reflecting on and reasoning about it. Consequently, they cannot know whether the conditional itself is true simply by reflecting on and reasoning about it. So P1″ is true.

Now, suppose that P2′ is true. If so, then it follows (from P1″ and P2′) that the Princeton proposition cannot be known a priori. But the Princeton proposition can be known a priori. So P2′ is false, and the publicity argument against the a priority of the 'meter' proposition fails. So the fact that the stipulator's knowledge of the meter proposition would have to be based on this bit of metalinguistic knowledge is no reason to deny that the former is a priori.

4 Objections

I turn now to two potential objections to my argument against P2′. The first objection is that it is impossible for any being to do what I am imagining the Aliens to be doing. Just as it is impossible (not just difficult) to single out a possible bald man in the doorway, it is impossible (not just difficult) to single out a world other than one's own. The Aliens cannot, even in principle, pick out our world uniquely,

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[8] See Soames (2003, pp. 417-22), (2007, pp. 264-5) for more detailed discussion.

[9] Soames himself has no objection to the possibility of such beings; see his (2007, p. 271).

because they will be unable to differentiate it from qualitatively identical worlds containing numerically distinct individuals. There are countless worlds which are exact duplicates of ours, both macroscopically and microscopically, but which contain fundamental particles that are numerically distinct from any actual fundamental particles. No amount of describing or imagining will enable the Aliens to single out our world from among its qualitative duplicates. But if they cannot get our world uniquely in mind, then they are in no position to reflect on and reason about the Princeton proposition. So the alleged counterexample to P2′ fails.

This objection rests on the controversial thesis that there can be haecceitistic differences among qualitatively identical worlds,[10] but let us simply grant that this is correct. To see where the above reasoning goes wrong, notice that in fact it is quite easy to single out a possible bald man in my doorway. For instance, Barack Obama (although not actually bald) is a possible bald man in my doorway. There is no obstacle to singling out an actually existing individual in other worlds, so long as one is acquainted with that individual.

All we need for a counterexample to P2′ is a single case in which our Aliens are able to get our world in mind. So let us make it as easy for them as possible. Specifically, let us suppose that the Aliens' world contains every single object that exists in our world and, moreover, that they have become acquainted with each and every one of them (without ever ascertaining whether any of the things that they have become acquainted with is Princeton's philosophy department). In that case, they will not have to limit themselves to purely qualitative descriptions when they are attempting to pick out our world, for they may also stipulate that the relevant Russellian propositions—involving those very inhabitants of their (and our) world—are to be true in the world that they are trying to single out in thought. They will have no more trouble singling out our world from among its qualitative duplicates than I have in singling out this table before me from among its possible qualitative duplicates. (As Kripke says, "I have the table in my hands… I am talking, by definition, about *it*."[11]) *These* Aliens can understand the Princeton proposition, but still will be in no position to know the Princeton proposition a priori, for they cannot know that its consequent is true except by empirical investigation. And this one case is all that is needed for a counterexample to P2′.

The second potential objection takes issue with P1″. Here, the idea is that the Aliens *are* in a position to know the consequent of the Princeton proposition a priori and, hence, the Princeton proposition itself. For, just as they got our world in mind by imagining it is full detail, they may get their own world in mind by imagining it in full detail (whether or not they realize that the world they have gotten in mind is the world they inhabit). They can name this world 'β'. And they can know a priori that Princeton has a philosophy department in β. They can also have a priori knowledge of the proposition expressed by their sentence 'If Princeton has a philosophy department *here* [said demonstrating their own world, i.e., β] then Princeton has a philosophy department' which—since their terms 'β' and 'here' pick out the same world—just is the proposition that if Princeton has a philosophy

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[10] See Kaplan (1975, §4), Adams (1979), and Lewis (1986, §4.4) for discussion of haecceitism.

[11] Kripke (1980, pp. 52-3).

department in β then Princeton has a philosophy department. Since the Aliens would know both this proposition and its antecedent a priori, they would therefore be in a position to draw the a priori inference that Princeton has a philosophy department. Finally, armed with both this a priori knowledge of the consequent of the Princeton proposition and the a priori knowledge (from five paragraphs back) of its antecedent, the Aliens can infer the Princeton proposition itself and thereby know it a priori.

The misstep in this argument is the final step. Even the most radical Millians will deny that the Aliens are in a position to draw the a priori inference that Princeton has a philosophy department from the indicated propositions about β. After all, Millians are already in need of some strategy for denying that Lois's knowledge (i) that Superman flies and (ii) that Clark is the Daily Planet's mild-mannered reporter puts her in a position to infer (iii) that the Daily Planet's mild-mannered reporter flies. By Millian lights, Lois does indeed know that Clark flies (since this just is the knowledge of (i)). But because she knows (i) under the guise 'Superman flies', not 'Clark flies', she cannot rationally infer (iii) from (i) and (ii).[12] Similarly, Millians can (and should) insist that, because the Aliens would know the relevant conditional under a demonstrative guise and its antecedent under a nondemonstrative guise, they are not in a position to rationally infer that Princeton has a philosophy department.[13]

Moreover, one who advances this objection is in no position to endorse the publicity argument. For suppose that the Aliens are indeed in a position to draw the a priori inference that Princeton has a philosophy department on the basis of their a priori knowledge of the indicated propositions about β. By exactly analogous reasoning, they would also be in a position to know the 'meter' proposition itself a priori. After all, they can know a priori that the 'meter' proposition is true in β and they can know a priori that if the 'meter' proposition is true in β then the 'meter' proposition is true. So if they were in a position to draw the a priori inference that the Princeton proposition is true, they would likewise be in a position to draw the a priori inference that the 'meter' proposition is true. But P1′, together with P2′, entails that the 'meter' proposition *cannot* be known a priori. So one would have to reject either P1′ or P2′. P1′ is unassailable. So one who advances the present objection would have to deny P2′ and therefore concede that the publicity argument is unsound.

I conclude that P2′ is false, and the publicity argument against the a priority of the 'meter' proposition fails. Moreover, we lose what would seem to be our best reason for taking this kind of metalinguistic knowledge to be a posteriori. We should therefore accept that the 'meter' proposition can be known a priori—if only by the stipulator—and that the fact that knowledge of the meter proposition must be based on antecedent knowledge of the 'meter' proposition poses no threat to its a priority.

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[12] For ease of exposition, I assume that propositional guises are sentences in a natural language. See Salmon (1986) for an early defense of guise Millianism and Tillman (2005) for an argument that Millians cannot do without guises.

[13] Soames himself (2007, p. 263) makes essentially the same point, but in terms of "ways of knowing" rather than "guises."

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