

WE DON'T LEARN ABOUT THE WORLD BY EXAMINING CONCEPTS:  
A RESPONSE TO CARRIE JENKINS  
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Strongly influenced by a Quinean naturalism, I have presented two arguments against the a priori: first, I claim to undermine the motivation for the a priori; second, I claim to demonstrate the obscurity of the a priori (1996, 1998, 2002, 2005a,b, 2011, 2012).<sup>1</sup> Carrie Jenkins (this volume) is critical of both arguments. Drawing to some extent on her interesting book *Grounding Concepts: An Empirical Basis for Arithmetical Knowledge* (2008), she claims to explain a priori knowledge as knowledge gained by the examination of our concepts. I think that this explanation fails

### 1. Undermining the Motivation

My paper “No Place for the A Priori” begins:

Why believe in the a priori? The answer is clear: there are many examples, drawn from mathematics, logic and philosophy, of knowledge that does not seem to be empirical. It does not seem possible that this knowledge could be justified or revised “by experience.” It *must* be justified in some other way, justified a priori. (2010: 271; 2011: 9)

Jenkins criticizes this way of formulating the motivation for the a priori:

I am certainly sympathetic to the thought that some pieces of mathematical and logical knowledge *seem distinctive* with respect to their epistemological underpinnings in appearing to enjoy some kind of independence from experience. But I am not at all sure whether any modal claim of the kind focused on by Devitt in the second and third quoted sentences is a good way to capture the appearance in question. (##5)

Jenkins also speaks approvingly of the following formulation of the motivation: “there seem *to be* many, many examples’ of propositions which there are a priori reasons to believe” (Bonjour 2005a: 100-1). And a few page later she talks of “the appearance of some knowledge being distinctively independent of experience” (##6). I am happy to go with the nonmodal formulations that Jenkins prefers.

Jenkins thinks that this matter of formulations is important: “the modal formulations of ‘the motivation’ are the only ones to which Devitt’s arguments speak” (##5). I think that she is wrong about this. Her error may arise from a misunderstanding.

Jenkins writes as if my first argument claims to explain the troublesome knowledge of mathematics, logic, and philosophy empirically: she thinks that the argument “is meant to show

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<sup>1</sup> Devitt 1998 is a response to Rey 1998 and Field 1998. Devitt 2005a,b are my side of a debate about the a priori, the other side of which are Bonjour 2005a,b,c.

that we have an empirical explanation” of this knowledge (##3). It is not meant to show this and meaning to do so would be foolhardy indeed. For, as I emphasize, citing Georges Rey (1998), “we are not close to solving the epistemological problem of *anything*” (2010: 274; 2011: 12). What I actually meant to show is much more modest: that we have *no reason to believe* that the knowledge is *not* empirical. Thus, after describing Quinean confirmation holism, I sum up what I am arguing as follows:

we have no reason to believe that whereas scientific propositions, which are uncontroversially empirical, are confirmed in the holistic empirical way, the propositions of mathematics, logic, and philosophy are not; no reason to believe that there is a principled basis for drawing a line between what can be known this way and what cannot; no reason to believe that there is, in Quine’s vivid metaphor, a seam in the web of belief. (2010: 274; 2011: 12)<sup>2</sup>

Now if this claim is right, it surely does undermine the motivation for the a priori that Jenkins approves of. For, if right, it shows that despite the troublesome knowledge *appearing to be* nonempirical, we have no reason to think that it *is* nonempirical. This removes the theoretical need to suppose that there is another, a priori, way of knowing.

But is the claim right? Here is a summary of some of my argument for it.

**Concerning Mathematics** (2005a: 107-8; 2010: 274-5; 2011: 12-13). I make no pretense to solve the epistemological problem of mathematics but give two reasons why this is not a great concern to the project of undermining the motivation for the a priori. First, as just indicated, we do not have a serious theory that covers even the easiest examples of empirical knowledge, examples where experience plays its most direct role. So, the fact that we do not have one that covers the really difficult examples from mathematics hardly reflects on the claim that these are empirical too. Second, there is a special reason for not expecting the epistemological problem of mathematics to be anywhere near solved: the *metaphysical* problem of mathematics - what mathematics is *about* - remains so intractable. How could we solve the epistemological problem when we remain in such darkness about the metaphysical one? The point is that we no longer have any reason to think that, *if we solved the metaphysical problem*, the epistemological problem would not be open to an empirical solution.<sup>3</sup>

**Concerning Philosophy** (2010: 275-7; 2011: 13-16; 2012). The standard view is that *intuitions* elicited in “armchair” thought experiments provide the evidence for philosophical theories and that these intuitions are a priori. But, I argue, we have no need to see these intuitions as a priori. We can see them as being empirical theory-laden “central-processor” responses to phenomena, differing from many other such judgments only in being immediate and unreflective, not based on

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<sup>2</sup> Jenkins takes Quinean holism to have the consequence that “empirical justification accrues to *all* of our beliefs at once, en masse, in the same way and to the same degree” (##4). I don’t think this is a consequence and it is not my view.

<sup>3</sup> I make a similar response (2005a: 107-8) to the common view that necessities can only be known a priori. There is no reason to believe that if we solved the metaphysical problem of necessity we would not be able to explain our knowledge of necessities empirically.

any conscious reasoning. We should then trust a person's intuition as evidence about some kind only to the degree that we have confidence in her empirically based expertise about that kind. Even where we are right to trust intuitions in the short run, nothing rests on them in the long run. We can look for more direct evidence in scientific tests. In such a scientific test we examine the reality the intuition is *about*. These scientific examinations of reality, not intuitions about reality, are the primary source of evidence. (There is more on "armchair philosophy" in section 2 below).

**Concerning Logic** (2005a: 108-11; 2005b; 2010: 277-83; 2011: 16-21). The problem that logic poses for the naturalist, vividly stated by Laurence Bonjour (2001a,b), is that logic must be seen as a priori because we need it to get evidence for or against anything. To assess this problem we need to distinguish the *rules* that govern a person's practice in forming beliefs from *theories about* what those rules *are* (descriptive) and *should be* (normative). Now it is clear that for a belief formed by a process governed by rule *R* to be justified, *R* must be a good rule. And the problem is giving an empirical justification of the claim, *TR*, that *R* is indeed a good rule. In thinking of this, we should keep in mind that many of these rules are not deductive but rather "ampliative".

Now the simple naturalist response is that *TR* is justified by the empirical success of *R*. But there is a serious problem. This attempt to justify *TR* is likely to be "rule-circular", using *R* itself to show that *R* is good. Can this be avoided? Perhaps we can justify *TR* using rules in our evidential system *other than R*. We might then hope to avoid rule-circularity by thus showing each rule to be good in turn. But I think that this hope is likely to be vain. So the naturalist is likely to be stuck with some rule-circular justifications. How reprehensible is this? Some think that it is not reprehensible at all but Paul Boghossian (2000; 2001) has shown that there are real grounds for concern. Still there is no cause here for rejoicing among apriorists because they need to supply a justification for their view that the use of a priori intuitions is good and *that* justification would be rule-circular: the apriorists would *use* a priori intuitions to justify the view, as indeed Bonjour illustrates. So my project of undermining the motivation for a priori knowledge is not affected by the legitimate concern about rule-circularity.

I conclude this first argument as follows:

Many will remain unconvinced of the possibility of an empirical justification of the troublesome knowledge and will continue to think that the justification of this knowledge must be a priori. This thought would be rational if there were any grounds for optimism about the a priori. (2010: 283; 2011:21)

My second argument is that what we actually have are no grounds for optimism but rather grounds for pessimism. If this is right, it is not rational to believe in the a priori.

## **2. Demonstrating the Obscurity**

The standard ways of characterizing the a priori are in terms of what it *is not*: it is not, for example, "knowledge derived from experience". But, I insist, what we need is a characterization of what it *is*. "We need to describe a process for justifying a belief that is different from the empirical way and that we have some reason for thinking is actual" (2005a: 112; 2010: 283;

2011:22). The difficulty of providing this is well-demonstrated by the failure of traditional attempts based on analyticity (2005a: 112-13; 2010: 284-6; 2011: 23-4).

A typical example of alleged a priori knowledge is

(B) All bachelors are unmarried.

Suppose Sarah is the alleged knower. The traditional view then was that, simply in virtue of having the concept <bachelor>, Sarah has “Cartesian” access to its nature: she tacitly knows that its content is partly constituted by its inferential relation to <unmarried>. She can then bring this knowledge to consciousness by examining her concepts, a process of “conceptual analysis”. This conceptual knowledge was then thought to yield a priori knowledge of (B).

There is a well-known problem with this as an account of a priori knowledge. Sarah’s alleged knowledge about the concept <bachelor> would show Sarah that (B) was true only if she already knew that <all unmarrieds are unmarried> was true. But where does her knowledge of that “logical truth” come from? Without an account of the nonempirical justification of logical truths – and, we might add, a nonempirical justification of the *inferences* that lead Sarah from her alleged conceptual knowledge to knowledge of (B) – we have still not explained a nonempirical way of knowing.

I emphasized another problematic feature of the traditional explanation of the a priori: its almost entirely unargued Cartesianism.<sup>4</sup> My objection to this Cartesianism is central to my disagreement with Jenkins and so I shall go into it in some detail.

The contents of Sarah’s concepts must be constituted by relational properties of some sort: “internal” ones involving inferential relations among concepts and/or “external” ones involving certain direct causal relations to the world the concepts are about. Where the content is partly constituted by a certain external relation – plausible examples are the contents of <Cicero>, <elm>, and <water> – then it is hard to see how Sarah’s examination of what is “inside her head” could establish that such a relation constituted a content. But even the content-constituting internal relations pose serious problems for the traditional explanation. Consider Sarah’s alleged knowledge that the content of <bachelor> is partly constituted by its inferential relation to <unmarried>. The first problem is that this requires Sarah to believe that the inferential relation she notices between <bachelor> and <unmarried>, unlike the one she notices between <bachelor> and, say, <envied>, is *constitutive of the content of <bachelor>*. Such a belief is a substantive one involving the technical concept <content> that has its place in a very difficult and controversial semantic theory. Why suppose that Sarah’s competence with <bachelor> would alone lead to such a bold belief? Indeed, why suppose that Sarah has *any beliefs at all* in this tricky theoretical field that Jerry Fodor has delightfully named “psychosemantics” (1987)? Indeed, why wouldn’t she think that the relation to <unmarried>, like the relation to <envied>, simply reflects familiar knowledge about bachelors? Suppose, nonetheless, that she does form the bold content-constituting belief. The second, even more serious, problem for the traditional explanation is that we seem to have no basis for thinking that, simply in virtue of her competence, Sarah’s belief

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<sup>4</sup> Rey 2013 offers an argument. Devitt 2013 is a partial response.

about content, hence her resulting belief (B), is *justified*. We have no basis for giving these beliefs any special epistemic authority, and thus turning them into *knowledge*. We need a plausible explanation of these allegedly nonempirical processes of belief formation and justification and some reasons for believing in them.

This is not to deny, of course, that one *can* get knowledge by examining concepts. Many psychologists are attempting to do so, without much success in my view, and several philosophers specializing in psychosemantics have proposed some interesting theories. Still, it is proving very difficult to make progress here. And, importantly, such progress as we have made provides novel information *about concepts* not novel information *about the world* the concepts are about.

This has consequences for “conceptual analysis”. According to this popular meta-philosophy, philosophers find out about the world – for example, about morality - by examining concepts. If what I have been claiming is right, conceptual analysis must be mistaken. The typical philosopher, like almost everyone else, knows little about concepts and finds out about the world by examining *it*. And that’s just as well because if philosophers really proceeded by examining concepts they would have discovered almost nothing. *The intuitions that philosophers come up with in armchairs are not a priori ones about concepts but empirical ones about kinds*. Thus, consider that famous example of the armchair method, “the analysis of knowledge”. Although the philosopher is no expert about <knowledge>, she is quite an expert about knowledge: presented with descriptions of epistemic situations, she is good at identifying the ones that should count as knowledge. On the basis of these empirical intuitions about cases, the philosopher constructs an empirical theory about the nature of knowledge. So, the naturalist does not deny armchair intuitions a role in philosophy but does deny that their role has to be seen as a priori: the intuitions reflect an empirically-based expertise in the identification of kinds (2010: 276-7; 2011: 15).<sup>5</sup>

On the basis of my criticism of the traditional explanation of the a priori, I predicted that other attempted explanations will involve Cartesianism and/or taking logic for granted (2010: 287; 2011: 25). I found confirmation of this prediction (2010: 287-90; 2011: 25-9) in the works of Christopher Peacocke (2005), George Bealer (1992, 1999), and Laurence Bonjour (1998).<sup>6</sup>

Jenkins expresses sympathy with my criticisms of the traditional explanation and of Peacocke, Bealer, and Bonjour (##7-8). And she shows many signs of leaning in the naturalist direction. But then she proposes a view of the a priori with just the sort of Cartesianism I am criticizing.

### 3. Jenkins’ Proposal

Jenkins states her view thus: “our concepts are sensitive to our experience, and as a result they form a trustworthy on-board map of certain aspects of the world’s structure” (##9) Now we might quibble that it is surely thoughts, complex arrays of concepts, that map the world. But,

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<sup>5</sup> For more along these lines see Devitt and Sterelny 1999, pp. 282-7, and Devitt 2010.

<sup>6</sup> The prediction is not confirmed, however, by the work of Georges Rey (1998). Rey claims to give an account of a reliable process of belief formation that yields a priori knowledge. I argue (1998) that beliefs formed by his process are not knowledge at all.

quibble aside, this claim is as naturalistic as could be, containing not a whiff of the a priori. But then Jenkins goes on: “We can (more or less self-consciously) read information off this map by engaging in activities such as the ones philosophers sometimes call ‘conceptual analysis’ and ‘conceptual examination’, and by engaging in certain of the activities which non-philosophers might call ‘just thinking about things’” (##9). What is going on here? Calling an activity “conceptual examination” and calling it “just thinking about things” seem to be calling it quite different things. And naturalists think that the *non*-philosophers are calling the activity what it really is.

We need to distinguish carefully some putative processes of belief formation.

*NE*: Jenkins, and just about everyone else, would agree that we often form a belief about worldly things like bachelors as a result, at least partly, of a new experience. This is a paradigm empirical process and is obviously not a priori. We can set it aside

*JT*: We also often form a belief “by just thinking”: using deductive and ampliative reasoning, we infer the belief from *NE*-beliefs and/or from beliefs themselves ultimately inferred from *NE*-beliefs. This thinking involves applying our theory of the world, our “map of its structure”, to the reality in question. So it involves, for example, using the concept <bachelor>, contained in our theory, to think about bachelors. This form of belief formation is standardly exemplified in theoretical science, for example in Einstein’s famous 1905 papers. It is of course different from *NE* but it is nonetheless another paradigm empirical process. It is a way of “deriving knowledge from experience” and hence stands opposed to what has traditionally been called “a priori”. So it would be odd to call it “a priori” as Jenkins seems to.

*CE*: This is an alleged process of belief formation that philosophers often call “conceptual analysis”. We are alleged to gain knowledge of bachelors not simply by the *NE*-process of observing bachelors nor by the *JT*-process of *using* the concept of <bachelor> in theorizing about bachelors, but by standing back from our theory of bachelors and *examining* its concept of <bachelor>. This alleged process is the traditional Cartesian route to the a priori that I have just criticized in section 2. It is quite different from the *JT*-process. Yet it rather looks as if Jenkins is conflating these two processes.

Jenkins continues: “we *really do* have a different way of coming to know the truths of (say) mathematics and logic..., and this way *really does* (at least sometimes) proceed through analysis or examination of concepts, just as it seems to....we examine our concepts (or just: think), and read off information such as that  $7+5=12$ ” (##10). Once again we seem to have the idea of Cartesian access to the nature of our concepts. But notice the parenthetical “or just: think”. I think that we must conclude that both here and in the comparison of philosophers with non-philosophers, Jenkins really is conflating the putative *CE*-process of gaining knowledge by *examining* concepts with the actual *JT*-process of gaining knowledge by *using* concepts in thinking.

The naturalist believes that the *JT*-process yields knowledge that should be uncontroversially empirical and denies that there is any *CE*-process to a priori knowledge. We

have seen that Jenkins calls the products of both these processes “a priori”. Yet she later claims her account of a priori knowledge “is not at all in tension with the spirit of Devitt’s naturalism. The knowledge in question is ultimately empirical” (##11)! Now, for me, and I would have thought for almost everyone else, being *nonempirical* is *definitive* of being a priori. Still, I share Jenkins’ a lack of interest in arguing terminology (##11). The substantive issue raised by Jenkins is not whether she has characterized a way of knowing that should be called “a priori” but whether she has characterized one that is interestingly different from the ordinary empirical ones. Jenkins thinks that she has: “there are at least *two* ways of knowing: the ordinary empirical way(s), and the way that proceeds through the examination of empirically grounded concepts” (##11). The latter *seems to be CE*, the Cartesian route to knowledge that I have argued is not available, and it *has to be CE* if it is to be a second way of knowing. For, the alternative *JT* is an ordinary empirical way.

So what Jenkins needs to supply is a characterization of *CE* to support the idea that it is a viable further way of knowing. For this we must look to her response to my argument against Cartesianism. This response has some quite plausible things to say about our way of knowing. But the problem is that this way is always *JT* not *CE*. So the response does not provide what Jenkins needs.

My first problem with Cartesianism was with the idea that a competent person’s examination of a concept would alone yield the psychosemantic belief that the *content* of the concept was constituted by its relation to another concept. In her response, Jenkins seems to abandon *CE*:

the idea that we can read information off our conceptual maps is not based on the claim that conceptual competence involves possession of a tacit theory, or on the claim that a concept’s content is constituted by relations such that examining those concepts will necessarily lead us to believe in the obtaining of those relations. My more modest proposal is simply that, whatever concepts are like, *sometimes* we are guided in the formation of beliefs by sensitivity to the structure of our conceptual maps. (##9)

It is hard to see how the opening part of this passage leaves anything of Jenkins’ Cartesian idea that we get a priori knowledge by examining concepts. So it is not surprising that the closing “modest proposal” implies none of that idea: to be guided “by sensitivity to the structure of our conceptual maps” in gathering information is simply to be guided by our theories. This fits *JT*, an ordinary empirical way of knowing, and so gives no support *CE*.

My second problem was with the idea that a person’s competence would provide a nonempirical *justification* for any belief she might come to as a result of examining her concepts. Jenkins responds as follows: “What makes those beliefs justified is their epistemic dependence on the experiences to which the guiding concepts are sensitive”; “experience plays its epistemic role solely in the grounding of our concepts” so that when we “read off information” from our concepts “no further input from experience is required” (##10). Jenkins offers these descriptions in support of her alternative *CE*, the Cartesian way of knowing. I find the descriptions quite plausible (although I don’t say right). But the appearance of support for *CE* comes simply from

the conflation again. These descriptions of an epistemic process, as they stand, do not require the process to involve any *examination* of concepts, just the *use* of the concepts as in *JT*.

In “No Place” I allow that, from a reliabilist perspective, there *may* be a truth underlying the traditional explanation of the a priori, albeit a truth that is no use to the a priori. I find Jenkins’ descriptions quite plausible because they seem to be expressing that possible truth.

Suppose that it really was the case that the content of a person’s concept <bachelor> was partly constituted by its relation to <unmarried>. Then, I point out:

She might be disposed to believe [<All bachelors are unmarried>] even though she did not have the Cartesian access to her concepts... simply in virtue of the fact that <unmarried> *did* partly constitute <bachelor>. A consequence of this is that acquiring <bachelor> would be a reliable way of coming to this true belief. So, a reliabilist must then allow that her belief is justified (although, of course, she does not know its justification). That would be a truth in the traditional explanation. But this is no help to the a priori. It would show that the empirical process of acquiring a concept involved a process that justifies a necessary belief. But that justification does not differ in any epistemologically significant way from the empirical justification of a contingent belief, for example of <All bachelors are envied>: there is still no Cartesian route to justification. Just the same sort of empirically reliable mechanism must be in place in both cases for the beliefs to be justified. The difference between the cases is strictly semantic: if the mechanism appropriate for the justification of <All bachelors are unmarried> is not in place, then the person will not have the concept <bachelor> and hence will not even entertain that proposition; there is no analogue of this with <All bachelors are envied>. (2010: 286-7; 2011: 25)<sup>7</sup>

This contemplated path to knowledge clearly does not support Jenkins’ *CE*. First, it does not involve *examining* concepts. It simply involves *having* them. The person would have her knowledge that all bachelors are unmarried simply as a causal result of a reliable mechanism put in place when she acquired the concept <bachelor> from experience. She might never have thought about her concept, or even realized that she had the concept. Second, there is nothing about this contemplated path that entails any way of knowing other than the standard holistic empirical one; the justification comes from the experience of acquiring the concept. So this path can provide no support for the idea of a way of knowing interestingly different from the ordinary one.

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<sup>7</sup> For a defense of the final sentence, see Devitt 1996, pp. 30-6 and 1997, pp. 356-8. It is worth noting that the path to knowledge I am contemplating here – and I emphasize I am contemplating it not endorsing it – depends on it being a fact that <bachelor>’s relation to <unmarried> *does* partly constitute its content. So the path would be available only to the extent that the content of a concept is constituted by internal relations to other concepts not external ones involving certain direct causal relations to the world. This might have the consequence that this path could only yield knowledge of *uninteresting* propositions like <All bachelors are unmarried> (Devitt and Sterelny 1999: 284-5).



Jenkins thinks that there is an a priori way of knowing “that proceeds through the examination of empirically grounded concepts” and hence is different from the ordinary empirical way (##11). I have found no support for this Cartesianism in the quite plausible things she has to say about our way of knowing. My criticisms of Cartesianism still stand.

We can sometimes, with a deal of effort, learn about concepts by examining them. On the few occasions where we succeed in thus learning, we can infer facts about the world that the concepts are about. But, it is most unlikely that what we could thus infer would be news. We would almost certainly know those worldly facts already because we know so much more about the world than about our concepts (2010). As a matter of fact, we don’t learn about the world by examining concepts. And the a priori remains as obscure as ever.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Carrie Jenkins for helpful comments on a draft of this paper.

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