

REPLY TO BONJOUR
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"There is No A Priori" (Devitt 2003a) is, in effect, partly a response to the main arguments in Laurence Bonjour's "In Defense of A Priori Reasons" (2003a). So this reply is largely to his "Reply to Devitt" (2003b).

My 2003a has two criticisms of the a priori: (i) we don't need it because all justification could be empirical; (ii) the whole idea of the a priori is deeply obscure.

The central issue over (i) concerns rule-circularity and self-defeat. I shall focus on rule-circularity, as does Bonjour. An argument is rule-circular if it aims to establish a conclusion that asserts the goodness of the rules used in that very argument. I claimed (Response 3) that although rule-circularity is initially worrying it is not in fact reprehensible. I cited some arguments for this claim but did not give any myself (although I did give one for self-defeat, for the view that rules could govern a procedure that supplies a rational basis for their own revision). Bonjour rejects my claim as "clearly and indeed obviously mistaken" but also gives no argument. What hangs on this unargued matter?

First, if naturalism needs to rely on a rule-circular argument, my claim had better be right. Now, taking S to be the set of rules constituting our actual evidential system, I did accept that my naturalistic argument for the epistemological thesis

T: S is a good evidential system

was rule-circular. But, interestingly, Bonjour's discussion raises the possibility that this acceptance was too hasty. After all, the metaphor of Neurath's boat suggests that the epistemological claim that a certain one of S's rules, say R, is good could be justified by an argument that uses other rules of S but not R itself; thus perhaps one could use inductive and deductive rules to justify abduction. There would be nothing circular about that. So if we could do that for claims about each rule of S in turn, we could justify T without rule-circularity. And the justification would be naturalistically kosher. Still, accomplishing this does seem a very tall order, particularly when one remembers that S must contain rules governing the choice between T and a rival T' that recommends a different system S'. Given our ignorance of S we cannot be certain that the naturalist must accept rule-circularity but I think it very likely that she must.

Second, if rationalism also needs to rely on a rule-circular argument then BonJour had better hope that I am right about them! I argued that rationalism does indeed rely on rule-circularity. Bonjour disagrees. His "basic point is that a priori insight is atomistic rather than holistic in character." So, we justify the overall claim T only indirectly by justifying particular claims about the rules that make up S with the result "that neither the issue of circularity nor that of self-defeat apply

in any clear way." Bonjour is wrong about this.

S is a system of rules for belief-formation. We all agree that S includes rules governing responses to perceptual experiences, ampliative rules, and deductive rules. According to the rationalist, S also includes a rule yielding a priori insights. Now the challenge posed by the skeptic is to say why any rule, R, is good. Bonjour responds to this challenge by appealing largely, if not entirely, to a priori insight; the mind directly or intuitively grasps the necessary fact that R is good. Whatever its other problems, there need be no circularity about this provided R is not the rule for a priori insight itself. Where R is that rule, the rule-circularity is obvious. So Bonjour's move to atomism does not avoid rule-circularity.

Criticism (i) aimed to show that all beliefs could be justified empirically, thus removing the motivation for the a priori. Among these beliefs are epistemological ones about the goodness of rules for belief formation. I doubt that all these epistemological beliefs could be justified empirically if rule-circularity is disallowed but there is no reason to think that they could not if rule-circularity is allowed. Bonjour is in no position to disallow rule-circularity because his own rationalism depends on it. For, if he had a justification for believing that a priori insight was a good method of belief formation, the justification would be an a priori insight.

In response to (ii), Bonjour continues to minimize the obscurity of the a priori, wondering what its "alleged 'mystery'" really amounts to. It is important to note something he does not do: he does not attempt an explanation that might reduce the mystery. We should not be surprised at this failure if I am right that nothing can reduce the mystery.

In charging that the a priori is deeply obscure I am, according to Bonjour, "simply rejecting the idea that merely finding something to be intuitively necessary can ever constitute in itself a reason for thinking that it is true." But I am not simply rejecting this: I am demanding an explanation of how it could be so. How could this intuitive process justify something unless the process is empirical? The a priori is mysterious because we do not have even a hint of a satisfactory answer. It seems like magic that a process in someone's mind can justify her belief in an external worldly fact without that justification arising from some sort of experiential link to that fact.

Those are my main points, but I have one more.

In (i) I took Bonjour to be rightly claiming that for a conclusion to be justified by an inference, the inference must be good, but I argued that he was wrongly claiming that our justification of its goodness must be a priori. This disagreement concerned that justification whoever provided it. However, Bonjour's (1998) actual requirement for a justified conclusion was that the very person making the inference accompany it with an a priori insight into its goodness. Paul Boghossian (2001), following Lewis Carroll, pointed out that this requirement that a proposition about the inference accompany the inference leads to an unstoppable regress. Bonjour has responded to this point with a very curious move: "it is often and quite possibly always a mistake to construe [a priori insights] as propositional in form"; "the relevant logical insight must be

construed as non-propositional in character, as a direct grasping of the way in which the conclusion is related to the premises and validly flows from them" (2003a). Bonjour's requirement, thus construed, has a role in his responses to both (i) and (ii).

This construal seems to commit Bonjour to an "a priori knowing-how," something that surely makes no sense. The relations between propositions in an inference are not propositions, of course, but any insights about those relations are essentially propositional, having contents specified by 'that'-clauses (e.g. 'that p follows from q') like any other propositions.

Bonjour's requirement was mistaken from the beginning. For an inference to justify a person's conclusion it simply has to be good. In an epistemological moment the person may indeed have the insight that the inference is good. Still, the justification of her conclusion does not depend on her having this insight. And, as I argued in (i), we should see such insights as empirical anyway.

Conclusion: Bonjour's response to (i) does not undermine my argument that belief in the a priori is unmotivated. And his response to (ii) leaves the a priori as obscure as ever.