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Postscript: Further Thoughts about Analyticity: 20 Years Later

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Introduction

One central thesis of the chapter¹ to which the present piece is an afterword was that two fundamentally distinct notions had been conflated under the label 'analytic' – an epistemological notion and a metaphysical one.²

A second central thesis was that while the critics of analyticity, Quine (1953) and Harman (1967) principally among them, were right to disparage the metaphysical notion, the epistemological notion could be shown to be cogent and to serve a useful role in the theory of *a priori* justification.

According to the metaphysical notion,

A sentence *S* is *metaphysically analytic* if and only if it is true (false) by virtue of its meaning alone (without any contribution from the world).

By contrast, the epistemic notion has it that

A sentence *S* is *epistemically analytic* if and only if it is possible to justifiably believe *S* merely by virtue of understanding *S*'s meaning (and without any contribution from sensory experience).

There had been a pervasive tendency in the literature to conflate these two ideas, as is illustrated by the following representative passage from BonJour (1998, p. 28):

the moderate empiricist position on *a priori* knowledge holds that while such knowledge genuinely exists ... it is nonetheless merely analytic in character – that is, very roughly, merely a product of human concepts, meaning, definitions, or linguistic conventions. Such knowledge thus says nothing substantive about the world.

In the 20 or so years since “Analyticity” was first published, the importance of distinguishing between the metaphysical and epistemological concepts has come to be widely accepted. It has become commonplace in discussions of analyticity to cite the distinction and to respect its substance.³

More controversial than the distinction itself has proven to be my claim that epistemic analyticity can play a significant role in explaining *a priori* justification. Also contentious, although to a much lesser degree, has been my rejection of the notion of metaphysical analyticity.

Gillian Russell (2008) put up an interesting defense of the metaphysical notion. Her arresting thought is that developments in our understanding of the notion of meaning, since Quine's famous discussion, provide previously unavailable routes to a coherent conception of ‘truth solely in virtue of meaning.’

In my (2011) I explain why I am not persuaded by Russell's arguments; but I believe, nonetheless, that they deserve the considerable attention they have received. Recently, Bob Hale and Crispin Wright (forthcoming) and Jared Warren (2014) have also advanced important defenses of the metaphysical notion. David Liggins (ms.) has an interesting analysis of some of the framework issues involved.

A more vigorous debate has centered on the claim that epistemological analyticity can play a central role in the epistemology of *a priori* justification. In connection with this issue, four big questions arise:

1. Can we explain *all a priori* justification via epistemic analyticity?
2. Assuming not, does that imply that we can't explain *any a priori* justification through epistemic analyticity? Is uniformity a requirement on the explanation of justification in the *a priori* domain?

3. Assuming uniformity is not a requirement, is there *any a priori* justification that we can explain via epistemic analyticity?
4. If we can explain some, how would it work?

I will look, inevitably too briefly, at some developments in my thinking about these issues since the initial appearance of "Analyticity."

Can Epistemic Analyticity Explain All *A Priori* Justification?

Throughout my explorations of the idea of epistemic analyticity I've never claimed that it can explain *all* cases of *a priori* justification. I was mostly concerned to show that the epistemically analytic was capable of explaining our knowledge of conceptual truths and of the basic truths and inferences of logic.

However, any proponent of epistemic analyticity must eventually confront the question whether all *a priori* justification can be explained in these terms. Over the years, it has become clear to me that the answer to this question has to be 'No.'

The famous case of color exclusion, for example, resists explanation in terms of epistemic analyticity. I know *a priori* that nothing can be red and green all over at the same time. But knowledge of this fact is not encoded in my grasp of the relevant color concepts, as can be seen from the following considerations. Knowledge of the exclusion does not reside in my grasp of the concept *red*, because I could have the concept *red* without so much as having the concept *green*. The concept *red* couldn't be speaking negatively about its compatibility with green, so to say, because it doesn't speak about it at all. Vice versa for the concept *green*.

At best, then, knowledge of the exclusion would have to reside in the *joint possession* of *red* and *green*. But isn't the joint possession of *red* and *green* just the simultaneous possession of each? If that's right, then joint possession can't contain any information that's not contained in the sum of what's contained in each.

As a result, we can't explain our *a priori* knowledge of the way in which red excludes green merely on the basis of our understanding of the ingredient color concepts. If we are nevertheless able to figure it out we must be relying on something else.⁴

A second kind of case that's problematic for epistemic analyticity arises when the concepts in question *do* speak of a necessary relation obtaining between two properties but where that doesn't suffice for claiming that the relation obtains in reality.

This seems to be the case with *normative* truths. Take morality. On the basis of a Trolley thought experiment, you might conclude that it is not morally permissible to throw the fat man off the bridge in order to stop the oncoming trolley and save the five innocent persons strapped to the rails below. But it would not be plausible to claim that your judgment derives solely from your understanding of the ingredient concepts.

The reason why is related to Moore's Open Question Argument (Moore, 1903). If someone tells us that, according to his concept of *good*, the good always involves some particular property – maximizing happiness, for example – we can always ask: But is that the *correct* concept of good, the one that delivers genuinely normative results, as opposed to simply telling us what's good according to your concept?

Notice the contrast here with the concept *square*. If someone said: According to my concept *square*, a square always has four sides, it wouldn't make any sense to ask: But is that the

correct concept *square*? By contrast, it always seems to make sense to ask this question about correctness of any particular normative concept.

If this is right, then we can't explain our *a priori* moral knowledge on the basis of our understanding of the ingredient concepts. If we are nevertheless able to figure it out, it seems as though we must be relying on something else.

Is Uniformity a Requirement?

If the argument up to this point is correct, then not all *a priori* justification can be explained via the understanding alone. But is it open to us to suppose that justification in the *a priori* domain may have more than one source? Doesn't the argument up to this point imply that *no a priori* justification can be explained via epistemic analyticity?

I don't believe that all instances of *a priori* justification need have the same source.

There is an interesting contrast here with the empirical. Because the 'empirical' has a positive characterization, there is no question that it has a unified source – namely, sensory experience. (That's not to deny, of course, that there are different subspecies of empirical knowledge – for example, inferential versus observational.)

But the *a priori* is defined as that which is *not* empirical. And this means that it is not guaranteed up front that everything that is *a priori* will have the same epistemic basis. For all that the notion of the *a priori* implies it's possible that some *a priori* justification has its source in understanding and the rest in some other source, for example, intuition.

We should be open to the suggestion that *a priori* justification is generated in several different ways, using different resources.

Can Epistemic Analyticity Explain Even Some Cases of *A Priori* Justification?

But can we in fact explain *any* cases of *a priori* justification through epistemic analyticity?

Let us look at sentences and inferences where such explanations seem most plausible:

- (1) All squares have four sides.
- (2) All foxes are foxes.
- (3) If all vixens are foxes, and all foxes are mammals, then all vixens are mammals.
- (4) All vixens are foxes and all foxes are mammals, so: All foxes are mammals.
- (5) Anyone who knows *p* believes *p*.

If a sentence *S* is epistemically analytic, we have said, then an understanding of its meaning suffices for our being able to justifiably assent to it. But suffices how?

This fundamental issue was not clear in "Analyticity." I got a lot clearer about it in my (2003b) and subsequently. Once the issue is clarified, it becomes much harder to see exactly how explanations in terms of epistemic analyticity are supposed to work, even while it continues to look extremely plausible that at least some of our *a priori* knowledge should be explained in this way.

Broadly speaking, there are two very different routes from grasp to justifiable assent, depending on how we think about the relation between grasp and assent. On one way of thinking about it,

(Constitutive)

Grasp of S's meaning is in part *constituted* by a disposition to assent to S.

On an alternative way of thinking about it,

(Basis)

Grasp of S's meaning is constituted by something distinct from the disposition to assent to S but provides a potential *epistemic basis* for the disposition to assent.

The former, *Constitutive*, option in effect construes the understanding of a given sentence in *conceptual role* terms. To grasp S's meaning is to be disposed to assent to S under certain conditions, or to be prepared to make certain inferences involving S.

For example, one influential view has it that for you to mean *conjunction* by 'and' you must be prepared to infer according to (4) and in general from any sentence of the form 'A and B' to 'A.' Similarly, to understand (1) you must be prepared to assent to it.

On the alternative Basis view, grasp of p is distinct from any disposition to assent to p, and so can serve, and sometimes does serve, as the epistemic basis for assenting to p.

The Constitutive View

Let me begin with the first option, the Constitutive view. One limitation of such a view is that a conceptual role semantics, viewed simply as a theory of meaning, has always seemed most plausible in the case of the logical constants, and perhaps also of theoretical terms, but not so much in application to other concepts. If this is right, then the Constitutive view will have limited application.

Williamson (2003; 2007; 2012) has denied that it is plausible as a theory of meaning in even the most favorable cases. He denies that there are any constitutive understanding-assent links.

I don't believe that Williamson's case against the very existence of such constitutive understanding-assent links succeeds; but I won't argue for that here (see my 2012).

However, I do agree that a conceptual role semantics is not plausible for many types of concept – in particular, for color concepts or moral concepts.

More importantly for our purposes, even in those cases where a disposition to assent is plausible as a theory of grasp, it's not at all clear why the grasp-constituting dispositions come out *justified* as a mere consequence of the fact that they are grasp-constituting.

It is tempting to think otherwise (a fact to which I can attest). Suppose that my possessing the concept *and* is constituted in part by my disposition to infer from 'A and B' to 'A.' It's tempting to think that I'm justified in making such an inference merely because it is constitutive of my possession of the concept *and*.

But how is that supposed to work? Is any disposition that is built into the possession of a given concept thereby justified? My (2003a) presented a series of counter-examples to such a generalized meaning-justification connection, and proposed a much more restricted

principle bridging concept grasp and justification. A number of critics (see, for example, Schechter and Enoch, 2006) have highlighted various problems for my proposal.

But the consideration that turned me decisively against Constitutive accounts was one that I had been dimly aware of all along, but which I hadn't confronted properly, and it's this: Even if we got a bridge principle that returned the right verdicts on particular cases, the resultant account of epistemic justification would still be irretrievably *externalist*, since it won't in general be introspectively accessible to the subject which of his dispositions is concept constituting. And I reject externalist accounts of epistemic justification on the grounds that they distort the essentially normative character of the notion of justification.⁵

To summarize: There are three large problems for a Constitutive version of an epistemic analyticity account of *a priori* justification.

- Conceptual role theories are plausible only for a limited range of concepts.
- It's not clear that there is a plausible meaning-justification connection that is extensionally correct.
- Any such connection looks to deliver only an externalist justification for the disposition to assent, one that would be opaque to the subject.

The Basis View

Do *Basis* accounts fare any better?

On a *Basis* account, the understanding of *p* is constituted somehow or other, the crucial point being that, since it is not constituted by facts involving assent to *p*, it can serve as an *epistemic basis* for assent to *p*.

Of course, we have neither a settled view of understanding, nor a settled view of what an epistemic basis is – and these facts make it hard to flesh out such an account in the requisite detail. We can be confident, though, that both of these notions are in good standing, being needed quite generally, beyond the context of our immediate concerns.

What we are not entitled to be confident about, however, is that when we finally do get satisfying accounts of grasp and basis, it will be clear how grasp of a proposition *p* could serve as an *epistemic basis* for assent to *p*.

When I base my belief that the cat is on the mat on my experience of the cat's being on the mat, my grasp enables me to think the relevant thought assent to which I then base on my sensory experience. But what would it be for the grasp itself to be my basis?

There is one instance of this sort of basing that we may be said to understand reasonably well. And that is when my grasp of *p* consists in my grasp of some sort of explicit definition for *p*; and my basis for assenting to *p* consists in my inferring *p* from its definition (Frege-analyticity).

But this is clearly a very special case – special both in that grasp rarely consists in grasping an *explicit definition*, and in that basis rarely means *inferential basis*.

But if the relation between grasp and assent is not like that, what else could it be like?

The only other model that we have for something's serving as an epistemic basis for a belief is that which obtains between the perceptual state that *p* and assent to *p*. But how could the relation between grasp and assent be analogous to the relation that obtains in this case?

A perceptual state can serve as an epistemic basis for assent because it is a *presentation* of the world as being a certain way, a *seeming* – that's essential to its ability to rationalize belief.⁶

But it is hard to see how the grasp of the meaning of a sentence could be a presentation of anything.

Setting this problem to one side, there is another difficulty that any Basis account must confront. If the relation between understanding and the disposition to assent is contingent, as the Basis account would have it, then it is presumably *possible* for someone to understand *p* perfectly well and yet, even after extended reflection, refuse to assent to *p*. For example, most people who understand

- (5) Anyone who knows *p* believes *p*

assent to it. However, some experts on knowledge, who understand (5) perfectly well, refuse to assent to it. They assent to its negation (Williamson's example). On the Constitutivist account, according to which assent is constitutive of understanding, this refusal would impugn the claim that these experts understand (5) perfectly well. But no such conclusion follows on a Basis account.

How, though, on the Basis account, are we to explain why those who affirm (5) are justified on the basis of their understanding of (5), whereas those who deny (5) are not? By hypothesis, both groups understand (5) perfectly well.^{7,8}

Conclusion

There has always seemed something right about epistemic analyticity – intuitively, some *a priori* justification derives from our competence with the relevant concepts or meanings.

But it has become increasingly clear that not all *a priori* justification can be explained in this way. The domain of the normative poses an especially important challenge.

Furthermore, even in those cases where an explanation in terms of the epistemically analytic seems most promising, the exact mechanism by which justification for assent may be generated by the understanding alone seems obscure and ill understood.

All of this has made me take the classical project of explaining the *a priori* in part by appeal to the rationalist notion of 'intuition' much more seriously than I had previously been inclined to do (see Boghossian, 2016; forthcoming). Needless to say, much difficult work lies ahead.

Notes

- 1 Boghossian (1997). A somewhat abbreviated version of the paper appeared as Boghossian (1996).
- 2 For the most part, I will take sentences to be the bearers of analytic truth or falsity. But everything I say can be modified easily to apply to propositions. Furthermore, I will assume a justification-first epistemology and a broadly internalist view of justification; and I will focus on doxastic justification as opposed to propositional justification.
- 3 For example, the distinction plays a major role in Williamson (2007) and Russell (2008); also of interest are Margolis and Laurence (2001), Horwich (2000), and Glüer (2003).
- 4 As I explain later on, I am now inclined to look with favor on the suggestion that the missing ingredient is intuition.
- 5 If I were happy with externalist conceptions of justification, I would be a reliabilist. And in that case, it would be relatively easy to see what to say about the problem of *a priori* justification.

- 6 Bengson (2015) has emphasized the terminology of 'presentation.' Unlike him, though, I think of presentations as equivalent to seemings.
- 7 This argument originates with Ernest Sosa (2007). However, Sosa doesn't embed his argument, as I think is required for it to make sense, in the framework provided by the distinction between Constitutive and Basis accounts.
- 8 Here, again, it can seem tempting to think that intuition supplies the missing ingredient.

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