

## BonJour I

PHIL410

### BonJour's Moderate Rationalism

- BonJour develops and defends a moderate form of Rationalism.
- Rationalism, generally (as used here), is the view according to which the primary tool of human knowledge is *reason*. Where reason is a tool of knowledge, we speak in other words of *a priori* justification for belief: the rationalist maintains that by use of reason alone (or primarily), we may justify belief in the truth of a proposition.
- The traditional alternative to rationalism in the above sense is empiricism, according to which view the primary ingredient in human knowledge is experience. Here, we speak of *a posteriori* justification of belief – justification, that is, obtained posterior to experience.
- BonJour's form of rationalism is moderate insofar as it allows that our *a priori* insights are *fallible*. This means that rational insight may justify belief, even if it turns out that that belief is mistaken, that the *a priori* justification itself was thus somehow defective.
- BonJour's rationalism does retain the rationalist tenet according to which rational insight, when successful, is indeed insight into the necessary structure of reality. *A priori* truths, when genuine, are necessary truths.

### Traditional Rationalism and its Ills

- Traditionally, rationalists have taken an *all-or-nothing* approach to rational justification, which stronger position is vulnerable to effective criticism.
- For example, it was long believed that Euclidean geometry offered *a priori* insight into the nature of physical space. With the advent of Riemannian geometry and the empirical determination (in General Relativity Theory) that our spacetime was not “flat” came the realization that such insight was after all false. [It is proper however to note, as does BonJour, that the propositions of Euclidean geometry are not thus false, for all that: they remain true of a “flat” space. (Appendix, p. 224)]
  - o Other examples may be drawn from set theory (Russell's paradox, e.g.) and from the multitude of errors in reasoning which are commonplace (if, for all that, relatively tiny in number; p. 119).
  - o Still other examples involve the so-called truths of reason of the great rationalist metaphysicians. These include such propositions as that every event must have a cause; that no physical object may be in two places at once; that reality consists of a single, indivisible mind; that reality consists of innumerable “windowless” monads; etc. The conviction with which such propositions have been advanced, on the strength of “reason”, has tended to undermine confidence in the notion of *a priori* knowledge.
- Moreover, it is evidently impossible to demonstrate conclusively the reliability of reason. As we saw in the case of Descartes, the attempt to prove the truth-preserving nature of argumentation would appear necessarily to be circular.

- Otherwise, the history of epistemology from Hume forwards has produced a number of serious attacks on the capacity of reason to produce or even preserve truth.
  - Hume is famous for challenging the basic logic of induction: nothing present in the constant conjunction of pairs of events permits inference to either their being “necessarily connected” or their being conjoined in the future.
  - Kant is famous for arguing that the *a priori* offers us only insight into how the world appears to us; for philosophers of BonJour’s ilk, this is skepticism plain and simple, regardless of Kant’s protestations that he has thereby “saved science.”
  - Nietzsche, as we have seen, appears to regard reason as so much human habitat-building – not so much importantly true as useful for creatures like us.
  - Heidegger preserves the working-place of reason and philosophy generally, but only by isolating it and all other things within the embrace of a pragmatically-defined Being-in-the-world.
  - Radical empiricists such as Quine deny the analytic-synthetic and necessary-contingent distinctions on which rationalism is based. For Quine, our belief system is to be conceived holistically: no proposition is immune to “revision”, including those “principles of reason” – the rules of logic – by means of which our reasoning is defined.
  - “Pragmatic realists” such as Putnam reject the authority with which any rational principle might define in-itself reality. While our rational insights may well be true, they do not, on his account, uniquely identify the necessary structure of reality – there is no such thing, and no such idea, on his account.

#### The Need for Pure Reason

- The various criticisms offered against the *a priori* amount to so much “intellectual suicide,” on BonJour’s view.
- BonJour notes the vital role played by reasoning in human thought and knowledge.
  - Logic and mathematics: the propositions of logic and mathematics are generally regarded as being justifiable only by means of reason. If the law of non-contradiction and the proposition that  $2 + 2 = 4$  are knowably true, it can only be by rational apprehension of that truth. And it would seem that if we know anything for certain at all – beyond, perhaps, the fact of immediate experience – we know these propositions to be true.
  - Empirical knowledge: any proposition concerning the empirical which extends beyond the contents of immediate experience would seem justifiable only by means of rational inference. In order to justify beliefs about the past, about the future, about whatever is not immediately present, we must draw inferences from whatever is immediately present. If these inferences are justified, it would seem that they are justified only by *a priori* means.

- For example, my belief that there is a snoring dog behind me is based upon the sound I hear now. Perhaps I reason as follows: the dog I saw earlier today, Ben, has persisted and moved to a location behind me; the snoring sound that I now hear is made by animals of that sort; likely, therefore, the sound I hear is made by Ben. The inference here from general knowledge to specific instance, as well as the concepts of persistence and motion, involve principles of reason that cannot, arguably, be reduced to or derived from mere empirical fact.
    - In addition, BonJour will argue that it is only by *a priori* means that we can justify our general inductive inferences – inferences of the form, where snoring sounds have come from dogs in the past, snoring sounds in the present may justifiably be thought to come from dogs.
      - Reasoning in general: we employ basic forms of reasoning constantly. If-then; either-or; necessarily; must; might; could; is not; is; on the contrary; etc. The very forms of our understanding are rational. If the *a priori* – reasoning *per se* – is not generally reliable, then it is difficult to see just what human thought amounts to, as far as its relationship to anything that we might call truth or reality are concerned.
- Consequently, BonJour’s epithet, ‘intellectual suicide’ certainly seems appropriate where the general rejection of *a priori* justification of knowledge is concerned. If reason and inference generally do not “preserve truth,” then it seems likely that little if anything is known by humans. Indeed, it would appear then that the very notions of knowledge, truth, and reality are completely incoherent. Human thought amounts to so much “spew”.

#### Moderate Rationalism

- BonJour begins his account of rationalism with an account of (apparent) rational insight. His account is in some respects phenomenological: he describes a process by means of which one comes to a rational insight.
  - “[W]hen I carefully and reflectively consider the proposition (or inference) in question, I am able simply to see or grasp or apprehend that the proposition is *necessary*, that it must be true in any possible world or situation. ... Such a rational insight ... does not seem in general to depend on any particular sort of criterion or on any further discursive or ratiocinative process, but is instead direct and immediate...” (106-107)
  - This mental state is possible only given a clear understanding of certain things. (See example, below.)
- BonJour’s rationalism derives from a distinction he draws between *genuine* and *apparent* rational insight.
  - Genuine rational insight involves an actual intellectual grasp of some necessary feature of reality.
  - Apparent rational insight involves only what *seems to its subject* to be intellectual grasp of a necessary feature of reality.

- Bonjour rejects genuine rational insight as a requirement of *a priori* justification on the grounds that this criterion is too strong. There is no phenomenal way of determining whether a given rational insight is genuine or, rather, mistaken. In phenomenal terms, genuine and apparent rational insight are indistinguishable. Consequently, if genuine rational insight is required for *a priori* justification, *a priori* justification will forever go unjustified.
- Rational (i.e., *a priori*) insight will thus be *fallible* because it is impossible to determine whether a given instance of apparent rational insight is also a genuine rational insight.
  - However, this is not to say that apparent rational insight is itself a trivial matter, incapable of knowledge justification.
  - Bonjour includes strict requirements to be met for apparent rational insight:
    - The insight “must be considered with a reasonable degree of care” (114); and
    - The insight “must involve a genuine awareness by the person in question of the necessity or apparent necessity of the proposition,” which itself will require some understanding of the concept of necessity (*ibid.*).
- For example, are we justified in believing that nothing can be red and green all over?
  - In order to be justified *a priori* in such a belief, one must understand clearly the terms of the proposition, and thereby come to a judgment concerning the necessary nature of reality.
  - In this case, one must understand the concepts of greenness and redness along with the relation of “incompatibility or exclusion” implicit in the proposition.
  - One must then “see or grasp or apprehend” that the proposition in question cannot fail to be true, that there is no possible way the world could be that would falsify the proposition.
  - Given these conditions, according to Bonjour, one is in a state of *apparent rational insight*. In this state, one is justified in believing the proposition in question, even though it could turn out that the proposition in question is false.

#### Two (Tentative) Concerns

- Aside from the criticism that might be launched from quarters now familiar to us, let us consider more closely what Bonjour has in mind with his notion of “apparent rational insight.”
- If the account of *a priori* justification is too strong, then justification will typically fail, resulting in pervasive skepticism.
- Consequently, Bonjour advances a “moderate” form of *a priori* justification, one which will generally be satisfied under ordinary conditions of human thought, thus avoiding the threat of pervasive skepticism.

- We might, now, wonder whether the resulting concept of justification is sufficiently strong. According to Bonjour, apparent rational insight is sufficient for the justification term of knowledge, on this account. That is, where knowledge is analyzable in terms of justified, true belief, instances of apparent rational insight will justify one in making a knowledge claim, even though they do not guarantee the truth of the proposition. There is no guarantee of the truth of the proposition in question because the form of rational insight is *apparent*, only.
- That is, as above, Bonjour distinguishes actual (genuine) from apparent rational insight. The two, evidently, are phenomenally identical. But note that Bonjour hereby relinquishes any claim to the mind's actual, direct grasp or contemplation of a reality. The necessary truths of the world are in every case at one remove from the mind's grasp, insofar as the object of the mind's grasp is an *apparent* rational truth, not a rational truth per se. This might seem a particularly ugly form of the representation/reality distinction. Where reason operates, we operate not in truths, but in terms of only apparent truth. Reason's grasp is necessarily indirect, mediated by the very propositions otherwise presenting themselves as the vehicles of truth. Bonjour's account in this respect bears similarity with Kant's.
- Second, and relatedly, the overall structure of Bonjour's argument seems weaker in this light. If the alternative to moderate rationalism is pervasive skepticism, we should hope that our alternative is sufficiently robust to appear attractive as compared with skepticism. But apparent rational insight would appear to provide intellectual access only to apparent metaphysical reality. Apparent metaphysical reality is a poor cousin of the real thing. If Bonjour's position entails that we'll never really know, then the alternative presented to "intellectual suicide" is perhaps an intellectual coma. Maybe we'll wake up; but probably not.

## The Induction Problem

- Induction has been a notorious problem for philosophy since the time of Hume. If anything seems well-known by us, it might be that the sun will rise tomorrow – on the basis of its rising in the past. However, as we have seen, it is difficult to justify such a claim – to the point that many philosophers have given up the notion of necessity as a real characteristic of our universe.
- Bonjour believes that induction may be justified on *a priori* grounds. This is an unusual position, insofar as (a) *a priori* justification has come under broad suspicion and (b) rationalist justification of the workings of the empirical world has been generally rejected since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.
- Bonjour's account begins with definition of the sort of evidence typical of induction cases:
  - Standard inductive evidence: the observed proportion of *As* that are *Bs* converges on a certain ratio  $m/n$ . This ratio is stable insofar as subsequent observations tend to preserve it.
- We then face the question *why* this ratio is observed. We rule out randomness and chance because the ratio is distinctive, orderly, identifiable, rather than varying widely from one value to another. There must, then, be some reason why *As* and *Bs* are found in proportion  $m/n$ . This thought is part of Bonjour's *a priori* induction justification, which he expresses as follows:
  - (I-1) In a situation in which a standard inductive premise obtains, it is highly likely that there is some explanation (other than mere coincidence or chance) for the convergence and constancy of the observed proportion (and the more likely, the larger the number of cases in question). (208)
  - This notion admits of *a priori* justification, on Bonjour's view. ...
- The second element of Bonjour's *a priori* justification of induction involves the idea that the best explanation for the observed conjunction of *As* and *Bs* is that there exists a corresponding regularity in the world – i.e., a necessary connection, a natural law, etc., whose holding explains the behavior of *As* with respect to *Bs*.
  - (I-2) So long as the possibility that observation itself affect the proportion of *As* that are *Bs* is excluded, the best explanation, that is, the most likely to be true, for the truth of a standard inductive premise is the straight inductive explanation, namely that the observed proportion  $m/n$  accurately reflects (within a reasonable degree of approximation) a corresponding objective regularity in the world. (212)
  - This idea, too, is to be justified *a priori*. ...