

NECESSITY AND THE A PRIORI: A TRADITIONAL LINK REVISITED

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INTRODUCTION

Much of the contemporary discussion concerning the *a priori* has challenged the traditional link between necessity and the *a priori*. The traditional Kantian dictum took the former to be a criterion for the latter. Even if both concepts were distinct, they were internally mingled given that knowledge of necessity could not be derived from experience (Kant B4, B15). Recent scholarship has focused on the different character of each notion, i.e., the metaphysical character of the notion of necessity and the epistemic character of the *a priori*. Our capacity to know does not exhaust the realm of ontological possibilities; what is to say that the two notions are not coextensive. This reminder has guided some analyses of *a priori* justification,¹ and it has generated suspicion towards those attempts which appeal exclusively to non-epistemic notions, such as necessity or analyticity. As A. Casullo points out, those approaches focus on the notion of “*a priori* truth,” or “*a priori* proposition,” rather than on *a priori* knowledge or justification, which should be the main target of an epistemological analysis of the *a priori*. Even if *a priori* propositions may have non-epistemic features, Casullo continues, those features are not sufficient for an adequate epistemological justification.

A second aspect of this challenge is that once placed in its proper domain each notion has been capable of new controversial connections. There might be cases of contingent *a priori* truths, as suggested by A. Plantinga (8, see also chapter 5, section 2) and S. A. Kripke (*Naming and Necessity*, 34ff, and Moser 148), and also of necessary *a posteriori* ones, as the latter defends. These cases seem to question a self-evident connection between the two notions. In all it is not surprising that P. Kitcher, after showing the gaps in the arguments that try to show their equivalence, recommends giving the traditional doctrine the “burial it deserves” (207).

Although contemporary discussion does not deny a connection between necessity and the *a priori*, it shows the need of philosophical argument to make the connection manifest. This paper is meant to address that philosophical demand. To this end, first I will bring into play some elements of P. F. Strawson's reading of Kant's *a priori* and his understanding of necessity. In order to meet some of Casullo's demands for epistemic justification, I suggest the possibility of introducing counterfactual conditionals to elucidate the notion of necessity. However, the limitations of this first attempt take us to explore the notion of necessity in Wittgenstein's notes on norms of representation. Even if this second attempt established a coherent connection between necessity and the *a priori*, each term reappears so transformed after the analysis that Casullo's demands of what should constitute an epistemological justification of the *a priori* become questionable. Our new stance may serve to show that the suspicion of using a non-epistemic notion—such as necessity—when discussing the *a priori* is misplaced; since such suspicion relies on a separation between domains that can no longer be held.

ATTEMPT 1: KANT'S LINK REVISITED

According to P. F. Strawson, the proper task of philosophy is to bring to light the relations among fundamental concepts ("connective analysis") or, to put it another way, to offer an account of the necessary features of our conceptual scheme: "[Metaphysics] is concerned with the conceptual structure which is presupposed in all empirical inquiries" (*The Bounds of Sense*, 18). This conception certainly resembles Kant's as expressed in the *Prolegomena*:

I tried first whether Hume's objection might not be presented in a general manner, and I soon found that the concept of the connection of cause and effect is far from being the only concept through which the understanding thinks connections of things *a priori*; rather, metaphysics consists wholly of such concepts. (10)

Strawson, in his study on the *Critique of Pure Reason*, explores the *a priori* in relation to concepts, to the general traits of our experience, and to philosophical propositions at large. In all three applications, the *a priori* is linked to necessity and to the intelligibility of possible experience. The propositions describing our general conceptual framework have a 'distinctive status;' they constitute general presuppositions of knowledge in general; they are necessary conditions for the possibility of experience (*The Bounds of Sense*, 120-121). Thus philosophy brings understanding of our human nature by making explicit the interconnections among those general concepts and categories, without which our experience would be unintelligible. Strawson introduces the distinction between the two types of concepts thus:

For what distinguishes a category, if there are any, from an ordinary empirical concept is that when we push our notion of experience to the limits of coherent abstraction, we still find that this notion implies the applicability of the concept

in question. We call a concept merely empirical when we say: If experience had been different in *these* or *these* respects, we should have had no use for this concept. We call a concept non-empirical (*a priori*) when we can frame no coherent counter-factual antecedent from which we could derive such a consequent relating to that concept. (115)

According to Strawson, the *a priori* is linked to conceptual indispensability. There is a limit beyond which we cannot conceive of our experience as being “ours.” We learn about the necessary character “independently of experience” by thinking about possible worlds instead of the actual one (“By thinking those limits from within”). Counter-factual situations help us establish the limits of the knowable (as opposed to of what is known). Examples of such strategy can be found in *Individuals*, where Strawson explores the possibility of identification and reidentification in a merely auditory world. After having explored those limits, Strawson concludes that demonstratives are “theoretically indispensable” in any conceptual scheme involving particulars. Their indispensability reveals their necessary character (119).

Would Casullo be satisfied with this recourse to intelligibility to explain the connection between the *a priori* and the necessary? First, let us consider whether or not the analysis is epistemic or non-epistemic. As we have seen, Strawson applies the predicate *a priori* to concepts, traits of experience, and metaphysical propositions. In order for Casullo to accept the analysis as epistemic the usage of “*a priori*” would have to be primarily applied to the justification or knowledge itself rather than to truths or propositions. But Strawson does not focus on the knowledge or justification of those *a priori* truths; instead he appeals to intelligibility as a necessary condition for that peculiar status. At the same time, Strawson identifies the term “*a priori*” with non-empirical, which is typically an epistemic predicate in Casullo’s sense since it normally applies to justification of knowledge. Therefore, this analysis could be classified as an “Impure Epistemic Analysis” in his terminology. If this is the case, some of Casullo’s objections to such approaches would stand: Strawson would need to justify the intellectual intuition that allows us to “see” something as necessary, and also he would need to explain without regress that “seeing” something as necessarily true (i.e., a world without demonstrative elements is unintelligible) is a necessary condition for the *a priori* justification of someone holding that belief (17). I doubt that Strawson’s connective analysis would satisfy the type of justification here required.² However, there seems to be a suggestion in Strawson’s definition of the *a priori* worth exploring: the suggestion is not new, of course, but points towards the possibility of studying modality by means of counterfactuals.

As was presented above, the connection between the *a priori* and the necessary relied on that of conceptual indispensability, which in turn involved that of what can be coherently conceived. Presumably the limits of what can be conceived are given by the character of the traits themselves, and not by the limitations of the subject who does the thinking. In other words, it is not that I lack imagination to conceive of a different world, but that there is a point at which those possible worlds would cease to be coherent, i.e., intelligible. The ability to think in terms of what is possible as opposed to what is actual is not, of course, a philosophical peculiarity. We do it all the time in

our ordinary lives: we imagine what would have happened if so and so had showed up at the party; and we conclude that the fragile glass would have broken, had I dropped it on the floor. Counterfactuals do not always involve *a priori* grounds either. After the fact, we can assert, on *a posteriori* grounds, that: If I had taken that other route, I would have been stuck in a traffic jam. But, as Timothy Williamson has pointed out, even if not all counterfactuals are *a priori*, not all of them deal with necessary and sufficient conditions, and not all of them are linked to causality, counterfactual reasoning can still be useful to explain metaphysical necessity and possibility.³

Counterfactual reasoning could help us explain the thinking of possibilities without involving a mysterious “seeing” or peculiar philosophical ability. However, it is a form of modal reasoning. We can suppose the antecedent of a counterfactual conditional to be true, even if it is believed to be false (counter-fact), and infer a hypothetical state of affairs. Even if counterfactuals cannot be immediately dismissed as non-epistemic notions, the analysis continues to rely on the notion of necessity. And according to Casullo, a criterial argument from necessity could not work: even if the original Kantian modal argument was reshaped, and truth-values were disentangled from the general modal status of *p*, the “less ambitious” Modal argument could not provide *a priori* justification (92-93). The reason for this impossibility is (following Casullo) that our knowledge of true counterfactuals relies on empirical (*a posteriori*) knowledge. For Casullo, the Modal argument relies on the claim that experience teaches us nothing about the necessary character of propositions. But if this is the case, and counterfactuals are dismissed as adequate tools, the scope of *a priori* knowledge is severely restricted. As shown above, ordinary practical thinking and scientific knowledge rely on counterfactuals, but these are not independent of experience (as the Modal argument requires).

I do not think this criticism is decisive: it could be argued that not *all* knowledge of counterfactual conditionals relies on experience. In other words, we could accept that *a posteriori* knowledge may require some knowledge on *a priori* grounds. All that is required for a belief to be justified *a priori* is that its justification relies on some non-experiential source. And this claim seems to be one Casullo would accept (31). However, the adjustment blends *a priori* knowledge and *a posteriori* knowledge in a way that the distinction between the two becomes questionable. Even if the *a priori* itself is not questioned, the fruitfulness of the distinction is. We could no longer claim a peculiar status for philosophical propositions, or justify the divide between the scientific endeavor and the philosophical one. The distinction has become useless.

ATTEMPT 2: WITTGENSTEIN ON NECESSITY

The appeal to counterfactual reasoning as here presented has shown unfavorable consequences for the connection between necessity and the *a priori*. Even if Casullo’s demands for an epistemic justification of *a priori* knowledge could be met, the present analysis cannot account for the distinction between scientific and philosophical knowledge. I would like to explore another path suggested by Strawson himself. In his “Kant’s New Foundations of Metaphysics,” he connects Wittgenstein’s certainties with Kant’s notion of the synthetic *a priori*:

Not that *Wittgenstein* would call them that: he merely remarks that they are neither *a posteriori* nor logically (or analytically) guaranteed. Wittgenstein would not think it appropriate, or possible, to produce, as Kant does, arguments in their favour. Rather, he says, of the “world-picture” they constitute, that “it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.” (*Entity and Identity and Other Essays*, 235).

Throughout his intellectual career, Wittgenstein maintained the division between philosophy and science: “Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything [...]. One might also give the name ‘philosophy’ to what is possible *before* all new discoveries” (*Philosophical Investigations*, 126). According to Wittgenstein, the difference between science (empirical investigation) and philosophy is that one deals with facts, whereas the other one deals with possibilities. The “background against which I distinguish between true or false” is the framework that allows for other descriptive statements. Thus not all questioning is meaningful nor can be proved by later observations: “‘Doubting the existence of the external world’ does not mean for example doubting the existence of a planet, which later observations proved to exist” (*On Certainty*, §20, §53). They are certainties in which—to say it with Hacker and Baker—“doubt is not refuted but *excluded*” (Hacker and Baker 294): “To accept a proposition as unshakably certain [...] means to use it as a grammatical rule. This removes uncertainty from it” (Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* §170). We cannot meaningfully doubt those propositions since they delimit the bounds of sense. Experience cannot affect the distinctive status of certain propositions, thus their non-empirical character.

From this perspective, the *a priori* can be understood by studying the role of norms of representation, grammatical rules, or norms of expression. These are not established by experiment and cannot be false. It does not make sense to speak of truth or falsity in this context. Philosophical propositions when functioning as rules have a “distinctive status”; they guide the use of empirical propositions. They function as norms of what will count as a description of reality. We could say that they constitute the conditions for the possibility of any empirical description. And they guide, justify, and provide reasons for our different ways of acting within each language-game, given that “the rule-governed nature of our languages permeates our life” (*Remarks on Color* §303).

How can we address the notion of necessity from this perspective? In a famous passage of his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein wonders about the necessity involved in continuing a series of numbers. Could the force of the *must* in 2008 *must* follow 2006 in the series 2004, 2006 not serve to elucidate the necessary character of the norms of description of our conceptual scheme? If this was the case, to set the limits of intelligibility, to describe the general features of our conceptual scheme, would be to determine the conditions that *must* be met: “The rules of grammar distinguish sense and nonsense and if I use the forbidden combinations I talk non-sense” (*Wittgenstein’s Lecture*, 47; see also *On Certainty* §32, §153). According to Wittgenstein, this type of necessity does not entail any mysterious source: “Consider: ‘The only correlate in language to an intrinsic necessity is an arbitrary rule. It is the only thing which one can milk out of this intrinsic necessity into a proposition’” (*Philosophical*

Investigations §372). We know that something necessarily follows because there is an internal relation between the rule and acting in accord with it: to understand the game is to be able to continue the series. There is no gap between the game and the rules of the game. If we know how to play the game, we know the rules of the game. And those rules are arbitrary not only because they could have been very different, but because they have no ontological grounding. Yet they are necessary given that things are as they are. What is not arbitrary is the need for rules in order to have a game. We can certainly imagine different games, but we cannot imagine games in which there are no rules. The rule in itself cannot be true or false, correct or incorrect, but it offers the criterion for its correct application.

CONCLUSION

Wittgenstein's assimilation of the modal status to a normative one is not free from controversy.⁴ To say that a proposition is necessary in this view implies that it cannot be true or false. Thus it cannot be properly called a "proposition." The claim that the necessity of the rules guiding our linguistic practice is at the same time arbitrary poses challenges of interpretation in favor of linguistic or conventionalist readings. Ironically though, we have overcome one of Casullo's concerns: we are not mingling epistemic and non-epistemic notions. The source of necessity is not reality but language. And the cluster of concepts associated with necessity (intelligibility, language games...) seems to have just as little ontological weight. The suspicion of appealing to non-epistemic notions to explain the *a priori* seems unwarranted. But while the notion of necessity is no longer regarded as metaphysical, that of *a priori* seems to have lost its epistemic character. To say that the norms of representation are known *a priori* is to say that they cannot be justified, because the "chain of reasons has come to an end" (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §87; see also §198, §199, 217). The *a priori* here emerged has become indifferent to epistemological justification. Its status is only legitimized in our participation in language games as users, and in the possibility of rendering those rules explicit as observers. Casullo's insistence on a merely epistemological justification becomes meaningless in this context.

However, this result does not prove the inadequacy of the concept of necessity to deal with the notion of the *a priori*. Even if "this is all there is" to necessity in connection to the *a priori*, and even if "justification has to come to an end," philosophy can still be called non-empirical: those necessary features or basic presuppositions studied by the philosopher establish what can be said. They act as rules that govern the possibility of meaning; just like Strawson suggested, necessity is given by the limits of intelligibility. And yet the outcome seems to stir mixed feelings. On the one hand, the modest satisfaction of having found a reasonable account of the traditional connection; on the other, the melancholy of things lost in the process of elucidation. There is, of course, no need to choose between the two.

NOTES

1. See A. Casullo for a taxonomy of contemporary approaches to the *a priori* based on epistemic and non-epistemic conditions.

2. Regarding the first point, Strawson's position seems to embrace an immediate apprehension of necessary truths concerning reality. He acknowledges this type of apprehension, which is as natural as that of grasping that some proposition follows some other. It is a type of "rational relation;" (*Analysis and Metaphysics* 111) since it is not strictly causal, it does not hold in the realm of nature, and it does not take place in space and time. As he claims, "It is not, for example, a natural fact that scarlet things are necessarily red. When we assert, or think of, these necessities, the objects of our thought, whether they are directly named or represented by predicates, are the abstract entities themselves" (*Entity and Identity and Other Essays* 62). As to the second point, Strawson's naturalism accepts the inescapability of some of our beliefs in our conceptual scheme. But this recourse to human nature could not be regarded as an epistemological justification. According to his view, all that philosophy can do is to show the connections among concepts in a coherent manner from within. In order for the critic to succeed in exposing the limitations of the philosopher's account, she would have to show that there is another alternative which elucidates major connections among concepts, "not as a rigidly deductive system, but as a coherent whole whose parts are mutually dependent, interlocking in an intelligible way" (*Skepticism and Naturalism* 23).

3. Williamson also questions the epistemological significance of the distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* in "Philosophical Knowledge and Knowledge of Counterfactuals," *Grazer Philosophische* 74 (2007) and in "Knowledge of Counterfactuals", *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 64 (2009).

4. For an interesting criticism of Wittgenstein's concept of necessity see, for example, Javier Kalhat, *Philosophical Investigations* 31:1 (2008.)

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