A Quandary for the Naturalist

Howard Sankey*

Abstract: The paper raises a quandary for the naturalist friend of truth who rejects the *a priori* outright. The quandary is that instances of the T-scheme are analytic, hence knowable *a priori*. The naturalist must either renounce their friendship with truth or soften their stance on the *a priori*. The paper recommends the latter option.

Keywords: analytic; *a priori*; naturalism; truth.

1. Naturalism and the *a priori*

The naturalistic friend of truth faces an unremarked quandary with the T-scheme. The T-scheme is analytic, hence knowable *a priori*. That does not sit well with the naturalist who rejects the *a priori*.

Some naturalists (e.g., Devitt 2005) reject the *a priori* outright. It is obscure and we do not need it. Other naturalists (e.g. Papineau 2011) allow that there may be some *a priori* knowledge but downplay its role. It is philosophically insignificant.

*　University of Melbourne

　　https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5168-150X

　　School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, University of Melbourne, Grattan Street, Parkville, Victoria 3010 Australien

　　✉ chs@unimelb.edu.au

I am concerned here with naturalists of the former variety. The quandary I shall present is one that confronts the naturalist who rejects the *a priori* outright. The naturalist who downplays the *a priori* avoids the quandary.

I shall assume that the naturalist is a friend of truth. The friend of truth is one who thinks that truth exists, that it is valuable, that it is something that we aim for and sometimes achieve, that it is required for knowledge, and that it may play a role in explaining the success of our endeavours. But perhaps the naturalist should reconsider this friendship. I shall explore that option after presenting the quandary and asking whether it may be resolved by holistic considerations.

2. The T-Scheme

To begin with, let us remind ourselves of the T-scheme:

'P' is true iff P.

The T-scheme is widely thought to provide important insight into the nature of truth. Some philosophers take the T-scheme to tell us most of what there is to know about truth. Others hold that the T-scheme is to be supplemented in some way to arrive at a full-blown account of truth.

What is the status of the T-scheme? Is it true? Strictly speaking, the T-scheme is not itself a sentence that asserts a specific proposition. It is a scheme or schema that can be used to produce a sentence that asserts a proposition. We must therefore focus on particular instances of the T-scheme.

Let us take Tarski's own preferred example as paradigm (Tarski 1972):

(S)   'Snow is white' is true iff snow is white.

When first exposed to a sentence like (S), bewilderment is a common reaction. It seems obviously true, a truism, even uninformative. It is not uninformative. But it is indeed an obvious truism. For (S) is an analytic truth, something that can be known *a priori* to be true.

To see this, consider how you work out that (S) is true. For someone who does not know what 'true' means, 'S' informs them that the predicate 'is true' is only to be applied to a sentence when the state of affairs specified

by the sentence in fact obtains. For someone who does know what 'true' means, (S) is a statement of the obvious. For to say of the sentence mentioned on the left-hand side that it is true is just to say that the state of affairs specified on the right-hand side does indeed obtain. It is almost entirely what is meant by 'true' that what it is to say that a sentence is true is precisely that the state of affairs reported by the sentence does indeed obtain.[1]

Given that the attribution of truth to a sentence means that what the sentence reports to be the case obtains, we may conclude that (S) is analytic. But the notion of analyticity is subject to a well-known ambiguity (Boghossian 1996). A sentence is metaphysically analytic if it is true by virtue of its meaning alone. A sentence is epistemically analytic if one who understands the sentence is thereby justified in believing that the sentence is true.

I think (S) is analytic in both senses. First, for a sentence to be true the state of affairs that it reports must obtain. For (S) to be true, it must be the case that 'Snow is white' is true just in case snow is white. But it is precisely because (S) tells us that snow must be white for 'Snow is white' to be true that (S) is true. It is true in virtue of what 'true' means. So (S) is analytic in the metaphysical sense. Second, if one understands what (S) means, then one sees immediately that it must be true. For if one understands what 'true' means, one thereby understands that for 'Snow is white' to be true snow must in fact be white. Equally, one who understands what 'true' means will see immediately that, if snow is in fact white, then the sentence 'Snow is white' must be true. One who grasps the meaning of (S) is thereby justified in believing it to be true. So (S) is epistemically analytic as well.[2]

---

[1]   The reason I say "almost entirely" is that I do not wish to say that it is entirely what is meant. To say that 'Snow is white' is true is not to say exactly what one says when one says, "Snow is white". The former attributes a property to the sentence whereas the latter does not. I do not regard the truth-predicate as devoid of meaning in the way that the redundancy theory of truth does.

[2]   In this section, I have assumed that it is possible for (S) to be true. This raises the question whether the truth predicate applied to (S) is the same as the one employed in (S). In English, it is possible to employ a metalanguage at a range of

3. The Quandary

From here, it is a short step to the point that knowledge of (S) is *a priori*. For, if (S) is analytic, then no evidence is required in order for one to know that (S) is true. It is just a matter of what (S) means. Once it is recognized what (S) means, one thereby arrives at knowledge that (S) is true. No empirical evidence is required. It is known on an *a priori* basis.[3]

Here the naturalist friend of truth may need to reconsider that friendship. For if the naturalist is one who denies the *a priori* outright, they face a quandary. The quandary is what to do with (S) (or any other instance of the T-scheme more generally). (S) is known *a priori*. But the naturalist under consideration here is one who rejects the *a priori* outright. They cannot both be a friend of truth who accepts the T-scheme and reject the *a priori* outright. To remain friends, they may no longer reject the *a priori* outright. To persist with outright rejection, they must renounce the friendship.

4. The Holist Option

But before deciding whether to remain friends or persist with rejection, there is an option that the naturalist may explore. Maybe there is no need to agree that (S) is known *a priori* in the first place.

If one adopts a holistic epistemology along the lines of Quine (1953), one might argue that there is no *a priori* knowledge at all. Our beliefs form complex systems. Some of our beliefs are directly exposed to experience while others are protected from direct exposure to experience. This idea is captured in the well-known image of our belief systems as having a core and

---

levels as required. The truth predicate is shared across levels. It retains the same functional role across levels in a manner that ensures that it occurs at all levels with constant meaning.

[3] Of course, one may object that, surely, some empirical experience is required for a subject to even have a grasp of what (S) means. But that is the so-called "enabling" role of experience rather than the evidential role. Experience is required in order to possess the conceptual content of (S), not to recognize that it is true.

a periphery. Beliefs situated near the periphery, typically ones immediately connected with perception, are the ones directly exposed to experience. Beliefs situated closer to the core of the belief system, such as the truths of logic and mathematics, are not subject to immediate exposure to experience.

On this model, beliefs that lie at the centre of the belief system are protected from direct refutation in light of experience. But they remain open to possible revision in light of experience. As such, they are not strictly speaking *a priori* at all. Rather, like all beliefs, they are *a posteriori*. It is just that their connection with experience is indirect. They may indeed be among the least likely beliefs to be revised or replaced. And yet experience might in principle require revisions of the belief system that stretch all the way to the interior of the system. As such, beliefs that lie close to the centre of the belief system may be revised ultimately in response to occurrences at the periphery where the belief system comes into direct contact with reality by way of experience.

The naturalist might very well adopt this holistic approach (cf. Devitt 2005, 107). They might then say that the T-scheme (or instances of the T-scheme) are like the truths of logic and mathematics in that they lie close to the centre of the belief system. As such, they only appear to be *a priori*. But really, they are not. Like all the rest of our beliefs, they are open to possible revision in light of experience. Appearances to the contrary, (S) (and other instances of the T-scheme) are *a posteriori* truths after all.

While I have considerable sympathy with this picture, I find it difficult to reconcile with the case at hand. It is one thing to say that there are beliefs that are situated more or less close to the edge of the belief system. It is quite another to adopt the holistic approach to justification that goes along with this picture. I have no doubt that there are some beliefs whose justification depends on systemic considerations, such as whether they fit with closely associated beliefs within the belief system, or whether they provide a simpler account of some phenomena than other beliefs.

But the recognition that (S) is true is not obviously a matter of weighing up how the belief that (S) fits with surrounding beliefs in the belief system. Once one grasps the meaning of (S), it is a simple matter of recognizing that (S) must be true. The epistemic credentials of belief in (S) do not readily admit of construal in holistic terms. Rather, in this kind of case the

justification of the belief is immediately tied up with the understanding of the content of the belief. For this reason, I do not think that the holistic approach provides an out for the naturalist who outright rejects the *a priori*.

5. The Need for Truth

At this point, the naturalist may consider abandoning the friendship altogether. In the same way that some realists take realism to be an onto-logical position with no semantic component, the naturalist might declare that they have no need for truth, or the T-scheme for that matter.

How would this go? The naturalist might say that they are interested in substantive matters, such as the way the world is, rather than the question whether claims about the world are true. Or perhaps rather than seeking true beliefs about the world, the naturalist might hold that we wish to believe that the world is a given way only when the world is that way. The naturalist might, in other words, wish to reframe the various ways in which they previously trafficked in truth without using the word 'true'.

But while I have no doubt that such laborious circumlocution may be possible it would appear to be to no avail. For what is it to say that one is only interested in the substantive question of the way the world is, if it is not to ask what the truth about the world is? And what is it to say that we wish only to believe that the world is a given way when it is that way, if not to say that we wish only to believe the truth? The concept of truth is at play even if the word is not.

I do not think that this is the way to go for the naturalist. The friendship is not one that is so easily given up. Instead, I think the naturalist who outright rejects the *a priori* should reconsider their outright rejection.

6. The T-Scheme as *a priori*

What I would like to suggest is that the naturalist who outright rejects the *a priori* must remain a friend of truth but soften their stance on the *a priori*. Rather than reject the *a priori* outright, the naturalist should allow that there are some *a priori* truths. In the present context, they should

allow that the T-scheme (or, to speak strictly, its instances) may be known *a priori* to be true. Whether they should extend this attitude more broadly to other claims that might have a claim to being analytic and *a priori* is not something that needs to be decided here. And indeed, it is something that I would suggest is to be decided on a case-by-case basis. We may let the chips fall where they may. What can be granted now is that the naturalist friend of truth should maintain that friendship and forego outright rejection of the *a priori.*

Acknowledgements

References

Boghossian, Paul (1996), "Analyticity Reconsidered." *Nous*, 30(3): 360–91
https://doi.org/10.2307/2216275

Devitt, Michael (2005), "There is No *A Priori*." In *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, edited by M. Steup and E. Sosa, 105–14. Oxford: Blackwell.
https://doi.org/10.1002/9781394260744.ch8

Papineau, David (2011), "The Philosophical Insignificance of *A Priori* Knowledge." In *What Place for the A Priori?*, edited by M. J. Shaffer and M. Veber, 61–84. Chicago: Open Court.

Quine, Willard, V. O. (1953), "Two Dogmas of Empiricism." In *From a Logical Point of View*, 20–46. New York: Harper & Row.

Tarski, Alfred (1972), "The Semantic Conception of Truth." In *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language*, edited by L. Linsky, 13–49. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.