

# Introduction

## 1 The Contemporary Divide

The major divide in contemporary epistemology is between those who embrace and those who reject the a priori. The importance of the issue, however, extends beyond the boundaries of epistemology to virtually every other area of philosophy. To a large extent, one's views about the a priori determine how one goes about answering other philosophical questions. Current opinion is deeply divided and radically polarized. Proponents of the a priori frequently allege that rejecting it is tantamount to rejecting philosophy as a respectable intellectual discipline. Opponents respond that no intellectually respectable theory of knowledge can accommodate the a priori.

My goal is to provide a systematic treatment of the primary epistemological issues associated with the a priori that is sensitive to recent developments in the field of epistemology. Assessing the status of the a priori within contemporary epistemology requires distinguishing the requirements of the a priori from traditional assumptions about the nature of knowledge and justification. Freeing the a priori from those assumptions allows us to view it from a fresh perspective, which yields three major insights. First, the concept of a priori justification is minimal: it is simply the concept of nonexperiential justification. Second, the basic question that must be addressed to resolve the controversy over the existence of a priori knowledge is whether there are nonexperiential sources of justified beliefs. Third, and most important, articulating the concept of nonexperiential justification and establishing that there are nonexperiential sources of justified belief require empirical investigation. Hence, epistemologists must both acknowledge and embrace the role of empirical evidence in resolving these fundamental issues.

## 2 The Kantian Background

The contemporary discussion of a priori knowledge is shaped by Kant's introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*. There, in a remarkably short compass, he offers a definition of a priori knowledge, provides criteria for such knowledge that forge a close relationship between the a priori and the necessary, argues that some of our knowledge is indeed a priori, introduces the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions, and maintains that there are clear examples of synthetic a priori knowledge.

Kant's treatment of the a priori involves a conceptual framework, a series of questions posed within it, and responses to those questions. The framework consists of three distinctions: the *epistemic* distinction between a priori and empirical knowledge, the *metaphysical* distinction between necessary and contingent propositions, and the *semantic* distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions. Within this framework, he addresses four primary questions:

- (1) What is a priori knowledge?
- (2) Is there a priori knowledge?
- (3) What is the relationship between the a priori and the necessary?
- (4) What is the relationship between the a priori and the analytic?

The contemporary discussion proceeds largely within Kant's framework, addressing the questions he raises and taking his answers as a starting point.

## 3 Synopsis

Kant's four questions provide the general structure for this study. Part I, consisting of three chapters, addresses the concept of a priori justification. Chapter 1 provides a taxonomy of widely endorsed conditions on a priori justification. The conditions fall into two broad categories: epistemic and nonepistemic. I argue for two major claims. First, nonepistemic conditions are neither necessary nor sufficient for a priori justification. Second, if a theory imposes epistemic conditions on the a priori that differ from those it imposes on the posteriori, they must be supported by independent argument or rejected as ad hoc. Two defensible conditions on a priori justification emerge: (1) justification by a nonexperiential source, and (2) justification that is not defeasible by experience.

Chapter 2 examines two conceptions of a priori justification. The first alleges that condition (1) is both necessary and sufficient for such justification, and the second maintains that condition (2) is also necessary. Two criteria are introduced to evaluate them: continuity with historical precedent and coherence with generally accepted principles about justification

and knowledge. I argue that although the former favors neither, the latter favors the weaker conception, which allows for the possibility of experientially justified defeaters.

Chapter 3 articulates the requirements of fallible a priori justification. I distinguish two senses of fallibility, justification that does not guarantee truth and justification that is defeasible, and argue that, although these senses are logically independent of one another, there are some significant relations between them. This investigation allows me to show that several fallibilist accounts of a priori justification face difficulties that are avoided by the account defended in chapter 2.

Part II, also consisting of three chapters, addresses the existence of a priori knowledge. Chapter 4 examines arguments in favor of such knowledge. I identify three types of argument. The first offers an analysis of the concept of a priori knowledge and maintains that some knowledge satisfies the conditions in the analysis. The second offers criteria of the a priori and contends that some knowledge meets the criteria. The third maintains that radical empiricist theories of knowledge are deficient in some respect. I contend that the arguments fail. The conceptual arguments involve implausible conceptions of a priori knowledge. The criterial arguments involve false epistemic premises. The deficiency arguments fail because theories endorsing the a priori suffer from the same deficiencies.

Chapter 5 addresses arguments against the existence of a priori knowledge. I identify three types of argument. The first offers an analysis of the concept of a priori knowledge and maintains that no cases of knowledge satisfy the conditions in the analysis. The second offers radical empiricist accounts of knowledge of propositions alleged to be knowable only a priori. The third maintains that the a priori is incompatible with epistemic naturalism. I contend that the negative arguments also fail. The conceptual arguments impose implausible conditions on a priori knowledge. The radical empiricist accounts do not establish that the propositions in question are not also known a priori. Finally, I distinguish two varieties of epistemic naturalism and argue that neither is incompatible with the a priori.

Chapter 6 argues that proponents of the a priori face two major challenges: articulating the experiential/nonexperiential distinction and providing supporting evidence for the claim that there are nonexperiential sources of justification. I argue that the most promising approaches to addressing both involve empirical investigation. Concerning the first, I propose viewing experience as a natural kind whose underlying nature must be uncovered by empirical investigation. Concerning the second, I contend that providing compelling support for the a priori involves two related projects. The first, which is philosophical, involves more fully articulating the claim that there are nonexperiential sources of justification. The second involves providing empirical supporting evidence for the articulated claim.

Part III, consisting of two chapters, addresses Kant's third and fourth questions. My primary goal is to argue that, although these questions are

intrinsically interesting, resolving them is not necessary to answer the two prior questions concerning the concept and existence of a priori knowledge. In chapter 7, I argue that the relationship between the a priori and the necessary takes on prominence against the background of two views: the traditional rationalist conception of a priori knowledge and Kant's claim that necessity is a criterion of the a priori. Since I offer independent grounds for rejecting both views, resolving the disputes over the relationship is not necessary to answer the two prior questions.

Chapter 8 addresses two questions. Is there synthetic a priori knowledge? Is the analytic/synthetic distinction cogent? The epistemic significance of the first derives from the assumption that synthetic a priori knowledge raises difficult explanatory problems that are circumvented by analytic a priori knowledge. The epistemic significance of the second derives from the assumption that if the analytic/synthetic distinction is not cogent then the cogency of the a priori/a posteriori distinction is also doubtful. I argue that both assumptions are false and, as a consequence, resolving the controversies surrounding the two questions is not necessary to answer the two prior questions.

My presentation of the issues proceeds largely within the Kantian framework. In particular, I take for granted the distinction between necessary and contingent truths but offer no account of the distinction beyond the intuitive formulation presented earlier. I also take for granted the traditional view that belief is an attitude directed toward propositions. Once again, I offer no account of the nature of propositions or a defense of their existence. There are two reasons for this beyond the fact that I have nothing original to offer here. First, the arguments I offer do not turn on any particular view of the nature of the attitudes or their objects. Second, by not committing myself on these issues, I hope to present results whose cogency does not depend on particular views about these issues.