

Review Essay

Casullo on the Nature and Existence of A Priori Justification

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Albert Casullo, *A Priori Justification*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 272 pp.

Epistemology is one of the most discussed fields within philosophy today. Recently the traditional questions about the nature and existence of the a priori have been posed anew and a variety of interesting answers have been given as well. Albert Casullo, one of the leading participants in the discussion, has now written a book on the subject in his characteristic dense and penetrating style.

Casullo states that the goal of the book 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’ (p. 3). More specifically, ‘[a]ssessing 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’. This is undeniably a praiseworthy ambition.

By severing most of the links between the a priori and notions like certainty, necessity and analyticity among others, Casullo joins the modern trend of weakening, or relativizing, the a priori. It is a trend that also includes philosophers like Laurence Bonjour and Michael Friedman and that can be traced back to Hilary Putnam and, to some extent, to Saul Kripke. This ambition succeeds in Chapters 7 and 8, where he shows how much of the debate about the a priori has been infected by mistaken assumptions concerning the relations between the a priori and both necessity and analyticity. Nevertheless, we shall see how Casullo on certain key issues takes his ambition too far, to an extent that threatens to deprive the a priori of epistemological significance.

In the paragraph quoted above Casullo goes on to claim that ‘[f]reeing the a priori from those ambitions [...] yields three major insights’. These are:

- (i) The concept of a priori justification is minimal; it is nothing more than nonexperiential justification.

- (ii) The key question is whether there are nonexperiential sources of justification.
- (iii) Both articulating (i) and answering (ii) require empirical justification.

This reviewer will primarily take issue with (i) and (ii), arguing that, in effect, Casullo's project amounts to a deflation of the a priori.

Let us, however, begin by noting two omissions. First, even though Casullo for the most part fulfills his ambition of taking recent developments into account, he nevertheless neglects to discuss transcendental arguments. It may be true that the debate about transcendental arguments has lost its steam in the last two decades, but such arguments remain interesting candidates for providing a priori justification of their conclusions. Second, transcendental arguments are also connected to the second omission since such arguments indicate that Kant did not have in mind only metaphysical, but also, and perhaps primarily, epistemic, conceptual and/or presuppositional necessity. The author admirably covers the discussion initiated by Kripke regarding the relations between the a priori, analyticity and necessity, but neglects the other kinds of necessity. Both these omissions will have a role to play in the counter suggestion that this reviewer will sketch in section II.

I

The book is divided into III parts and 8 chapters. Space does not allow a complete coverage of the rich and dense discussions. The focus will instead be on those parts that are relevant for the points this reviewer would like to make.

In part I (Chapters 1-3) Casullo sets out to define the a priori, arguing that the primary target is a priori justification rather than a priori knowledge. The latter should thus be analyzed in terms of the former. One reason for agreeing with this claim is that it allows false beliefs to be justified a priori (p. 10). Given this priority, it is only natural that Casullo rejects definitions of a priori justification in solely nonepistemic terms like necessity and analyticity. The *definiendum* is epistemic and a definition should pinpoint what is distinctive about a priori justification compared to other types of justification. By contrast, nonepistemic definitions of the a priori concern the *propositions* whose justificatory status is in question rather than the justification itself (p. 12). At the end of Chapter 1 the author arrives at two leading proposals regarding how to define a priori justification, which he then assesses in the next chapter. Along the way he puts forward the contention that if one demands stronger conditions for a knowledge-claim when justified a priori than for other knowledge-claims (the author calls it the "strength category"), then, unless one has good arguments to support it, the demand is *ad hoc* (p. 25). This methodological remark is a

reflection of his ambition to take recent development within epistemology into account. The analytic tradition with its empiricist and antipsychologist program looked with suspicion upon more traditional accounts of the a priori according to which such justification and knowledge has an elevated status that ordinary empirical justification falls short of. Throughout, Casullo's ambition is to take the a priori down to earth and reject all attempts to without substantial arguments saddle a priori justification with characteristics that other kinds of justification lack. Many opposing arguments to the existence of a priori justification fail for this reason.

To the objection that the minimal conception, with its purely negative definition, is not sufficiently informative and hence should be replaced by a positive definition of a priori justification the author rather quickly answers by arguing that a positive definition will be too theory dependent (pp. 29–30). In the case of a positive definition one cannot reject the source contained in the definition without also rejecting the existence of a priori justification, or so Casullo argues. Here one may respond, first, by challenging why such a definition must specify a source, second, by questioning why the negative definition must be replaced rather than complemented by a positive definition or, third, by supplying criteria for a priori justification. In this case, one could then point out that if the criteria were fulfilled in the case under dispute, then one could reject the source without thereby rejecting the existence of a priori justification. Fourth and last, the negative definition depends heavily upon articulating an epistemologically significant sense of experience. Casullo takes note of the last objection and addresses it in Chapter 6.

Whether or not Casullo's considerations seem compelling, the two conceptions he arrives at are the minimal concept (AP1) according to which a priori justification simply is nonexperiential justification and (AP2) which supplements condition (AP1) with the further condition that the belief in question cannot be defeated by experience (p. 33). The two adequacy criteria that Casullo employs are conformity to historical usage (read Kant) and conformity to the rest of epistemology, which is in line with the ambition of the author to take recent developments into account.

While the first, historical, criterion does not decide the issue, since Kant is notoriously unclear, the second does so in favor of (AP1). The second criterion, i.e. conformity to the rest of epistemology as it stands today, mainly amounts to the *desideratum* that the relations holding between different experiential sources of justification should hold between experiential and nonexperiential sources of justification as well. Experiential sources such as perception and memory interact in various ways. They can justify and defeat the same beliefs,

but in order to track and differentiate between these interactions, justification and defeasibility should be kept apart. This is a theoretical virtue that (AP1) has, but which (AP2) lacks. Moreover, even though one source on one occasion can defeat the justification bestowed upon a belief by another source, it does not follow that the second source is not a source of justification at all. Perception may defeat the justification bestowed by memory for the belief that I closed the balcony door without it being the case that my memory never gives me any justification for my beliefs.

Casullo here introduces one of his key theses regarding justification: epistemic overdetermination – the phenomenon that a belief that is justified a priori can also be justified a posteriori. AP1 allows these evidential relations between experiential sources to hold between experiential and nonexperiential sources as well, crucially including overdetermination. AP2, on the other hand, does not allow this, since thus justificatory overdetermined beliefs would be empirically defeasible. AP2 thus fails to fulfill this ‘widely endorsed criterion of adequacy’ (p. 43) for defining the a priori. The minimal conception AP1 thus comes out on top of the evaluation.

In response, it may be pointed out that traditional epistemology regarded the experiential/nonexperiential divide as more epistemologically significant than the divides between different experiential sources. Precisely because of the alleged difference in significance it is problematical to use these analogies for this purpose. Perhaps recent developments within epistemology downplay the significance of the experiential/nonexperiential divide, but then the lesser significance affects the significance of a priori justification as well. Simply put, the less epistemic differences there are between experiential and nonexperiential sources of justification, the less significance the a priori has. This is a possibility that Casullo acknowledges at places (e.g., p. 170), but which he thinks needs further investigation before we can rule it out or take it to heart.

Another point should be mentioned concerning the ‘widely endorsed criterion’ that a proposition could be justified both a priori and a posteriori. If there are criteria of a priori justification, and consequently of a priori knowledge, then the *knowledge* of these propositions nevertheless is different in kind. Our knowledge a priori would have different characteristics than our knowledge a posteriori, even though another constituent of our knowledge, the proposition in question, would be the same. It should also be noted that rejecting overdetermination across the experiential/nonexperiential divide is consistent with admitting the possibility that a belief, which requires a priori justification to qualify as knowledge, could nevertheless be believed on empirical grounds. Many probably have such mathematical beliefs. These remarks highlight the

need for a fully developed account of justification in order reach a final decision on overdetermination.

While it is methodologically sound not to burden a definition of a controversial term with too many conditions, since we then end up discussing terminology instead of substantial issues, both these considerations nevertheless suggest that there better be something special with a priori justification or else such justification lacks epistemological interest. Thus, even if we settle for a minimal conception as the *definition* of a priori justification, so that its epistemological significance does not follow from the definition itself, then the significance of the a priori could instead be captured by criteria.

In particular, the objections raised here suggest that while empirical indefeasibility should not be included in the definition, this property provides a strong candidate for a criterion of a priori justification. Despite Casullo's objections against including empirical indefeasibility in the definition of a priori justification, he has not shown that empirical indefeasibility does not play another important role for a priori justification. We shall return to this counter suggestion below.

However, to propose empirical indefeasibility as a criterion is to reject the 'widely endorsed criterion of adequacy' of overdetermination of justification across the experiential/nonexperiential divide. To do so solely because the divide otherwise loses its epistemological significance seems *ad hoc*. An independent argument is thus needed. It is here that the omitted transcendental arguments and nonmetaphysical kinds of necessity might be brought in. In brief, the familiar Kantian idea would be that we come across propositions that are empirically indefeasible because any relevant empirical evidence presupposes their truth. These propositions are thus epistemically necessary in the sense that insofar as we have knowledge of the evidence we also know the propositions in question. They would therefore enjoy an a priori status. Perhaps they provide the conceptual framework that enables us to assess the empirical evidence and incorporate it into our body of knowledge. This reviewer is not arguing that there exists such a priori justification, but only that the question of its existence is epistemologically significant in a way that the existence of nonexperiential sources, with the features that Casullo argues for, would not be. One could even call the latter outcome a deflation of the a priori. Such a deflation would be welcome in many circles, but presumably not by Casullo himself.

II

Having defined the conception of a priori justification to his satisfaction, Casullo goes on in part II to consider arguments for and against the existence of a priori justification. The author works his way through the different kinds

of arguments by way of examples. No general conclusion concerning any kind can therefore be established – a perhaps unavoidable weakness given such a dialectical approach. None of the arguments go through, thus paving the way for Casullo's own proposal in Chapter 6.

The author is, as elsewhere, at his best picking the arguments apart that have been put forward by friends and foes of the *a priori*. This reviewer will not go through all the arguments here, but will instead focus upon those that are relevant for the counter suggestion given in the former section, with empirical indefeasibility as a criterion, rather than as part of the definition. For that purpose, the natural place to look would be the criterial arguments in sections 4.3-4.5. None of them considers empirical indefeasibility as a criterion, but instead necessity, irrefutability and certainty. Of them, irrefutability comes closest to indefeasibility. As an example, Casullo presents an argument from Carl Hempel to the conclusion that mathematical knowledge fulfills this criterion.

Hempel claims that no experiential evidence can disconfirm mathematical propositions and hence not confirm them either. To use Hempel's example (p. 94), we would not consider microbes failing to match up in arithmetical sums at different instances as disconfirming arithmetical propositions such as $2+3=5$. In response, Casullo strengthens the case against $2+3=5$ by increasing the number of disconfirming instances and 'subject[ing] the hypotheses invoked to explain away the apparent disconfirming instances to independent tests that fail to support them' (p. 95). According to Casullo, Hempel can then hold on to his thesis 'only at the expense of either divorcing mathematical propositions from their empirical applications or holding empirical beliefs that are at odds with available evidence' (*ibid.*).

Casullo does not spell out how the hypotheses that explain away the apparent counter examples fail. This is an admittedly difficult task (*sic!*), but the burden of proof is upon him. Nevertheless, a possible line of defense of irrefutability would be to hold that the apparent counter example is explained by, say, the time interval, which cognizers such as us must use in order to count the microbes both once and twice. In these time intervals the microbes simply multiply. Microbes thereby do not constitute appropriate objects of application for arithmetic (for us, that is, God would not need any time interval). Otherwise, by neglecting the time interval in and between the counts we could even construe counter examples to the law of identity by finding sets of microbes that shows that $3\neq 3!$ Microbes fail to fulfill the conditions for arithmetic being applicable to them for creatures like us. This would be a way of interpreting the ensuing quotation from Hempel (p. 96). In contrast to Hempel, however, this reviewer

would rather side with Kant in that not all of these conditions are conceptual and thus not all analytic. The time interval provides a nice illustration since God presumably has the same arithmetical concepts as we do. This defense shows why arithmetic is irrefutable by experience irrespective of the number of apparent disconfirming instances. This view of mathematics, moreover, fits nicely with the criterial counter suggestion about empirical indefeasibility outlined in the former section.

Hempel can therefore escape the trap set by Casullo. There is a sense in which arithmetical propositions can apply to empirical cases without them amounting to confirmations or disconfirmations of these propositions. Insofar as they fulfill the necessary conditions, these cases simply exemplify or instantiate arithmetical operations, which microbes, then, do not, i.e. as experienced by us.

According to Casullo, most of the arguments against the existence of a priori justification are based on mistaken views about the definition of such justification and about overdetermination. For instance, the claim that no proposition is rationally unrevisable, put forward by Putnam and Kitcher (sec. 5.2), is irrelevant since rational unrevisability is not a constituent of the definition of the a priori. The weaker claim that a priori justification entails *empirical* unrevisability and therefore does not exist is rejected since a belief that is justified a priori can also be justified a posteriori and, consequently, also be defeated a posteriori or empirically revised.

Quine is thereby swiftly dealt with. First of all, Putnam (in 1983), and others, interprets Quine as providing these arguments against the a priori in his famous paper 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism' (1951, pp. 123–4). Second, the explicit rejection of the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements is of no help for this purpose since Casullo has already in Chapter 1 argued that the minimal conception of the a priori does not include analyticity. Showing that there are mediate links between a priori justification and analyticity requires independent arguments, which are still to be seen.

To a greater extent than in the case of the supporting arguments, this reviewer believes that the opposing arguments have not been given a sufficiently charitable (i.e. strong) interpretation. This is especially the case with Quine's holistic approach. Before this reviewer presents stronger opposing arguments, two points are in order.

First, in assessing these arguments in general, and the opposing arguments in particular, the central question should not be so much whether there exists any a priori justification at all, but rather the more extended question whether there exists a priori justification to a sufficiently high degree to qualify as knowledge. Even though Casullo in later sections shows some sensitivity towards the

relevance of addressing this extended existence question, he unfortunately neglects to take it into account in part II.

Second, throughout the book Casullo uses a fruitful distinction between overriding and undermining defeaters. Unfortunately, he is not his usually careful self in drawing this distinction. For example, this reviewer is not sure what the term defeater refers to. At its first occurrence (p. 44), an overriding defeater to *p* is a *justified belief* that non-*p*, but this does not seem to fit with later passages (like p. 76) where the defeater instead constitutes the support for that belief. The latter passage nevertheless provides the useful information that an overriding defeater to *p* provides justification for not-*p* while undermining defeaters do not. Undermining defeaters instead question the grounds that purports to justify *p* (ibid.) That is, presumably, why undermining defeaters are source sensitive in a way that overriding defeaters are not (p. 45).¹

In any case, with this distinction in place we can still distinguish between different ways in which different kinds of defeaters count for or against an affirmative answer to the extended existence question. In the absence of any suggestion of an instance of a priori justification on Casullo's part an important piece of the puzzle is missing, but let us nevertheless suggest some candidates for both a priori justification and defeaters.

Many analytic philosophers have claimed that conceptual analysis provides a priori justification to a sufficiently high degree. While some of them have indeed specified the source that provides us with this cognitive ability, like intellectual intuition in the case of BonJour, this reviewer wishes to leave this specification open. Now, Kant's antinomies provide an example of undermining defeaters of conceptual analysis. Unchecked by experience, reason has an unavoidable tendency to yield contradictions. For each *p* supported by reason, reason can also provide as strong support for non-*p*. If we exchange reason for conceptual analysis, we have an outline of an undermining defeater of conceptual analysis as providing a priori justification to a sufficiently high degree to qualify as knowledge. This defeater is reminiscent of the difficulty within coherentism of choosing between incompatible but internally coherent systems. With different starting points, reason (read conceptual analysis) ends up with internally coherent, but mutually incompatible conceptual schemes. Given his dialectical approach, Casullo himself amply illustrates the shortcomings of an undermining approach. He undermines attempts at showing that there exists a priori justification as well as attempts to show that there are not. Thereby

1. Casullo is more careful in characterizing the distinction in his later paper (2005, pp. 53–54).

neither thesis has been proven. Although we may perhaps still credit reason or conceptual analysis with some initial credibility, the internal conflicts generated by conceptual analysis undermine our trust. This undermining defeater thus threatens an affirmative answer to the extended existence question.

Next, if we look beyond the mistaken assumptions concerning the definition of the a priori and its relation to analyticity, we can still find an opposing argument in Quine's holistic approach by reconstructing it as providing an overriding defeater of, for instance, conceptual analysis. The holistic approach shows how conceptual claims justified a priori repeatedly have been overridden by empirical discoveries to the extent that the status of conceptual analysis as a source of *knowledge* can be called into question.²

These two defeaters pose a tremendous challenge for Casullo's minimal conception of a priori justification as well as for the criterial counter suggestion. By focusing upon the extended existence question, it does not save the minimal conception to invoke overdetermination in the case of the holistic approach. The belief's status as knowledge is threatened anyhow. To the surprise of this reviewer, these two defeaters, or at least approximations of them, are not discussed, but merely listed as questions by Casullo in the following chapter, Chapter 6.³ The reason is that the answers await further (empirical?) investigation. It may be true that further investigation is called for, but this reviewer believes that that we already have collected enough data to give an at least tentative answer in the negative to the extended existence question.

In Chapter 6 entitled 'Towards a Resolution', Casullo presents his own proposal as to how the existence of the a priori should be assessed. Given the minimal definition of a priori justification, it is the notion of experience that is the primary object for such investigations. Instead of relying upon a priori

2. This reconstruction is reminiscent of Putnam's in (1983). See also Putnam (1975) and Friedman (2000). Quine's holistic argument is discussed in Ch. 2 of Janvid (2001) and an alternative approach based on conceptual analysis in the form of implicit definitions outlined in Ch. 5 of the same work.

3. As further evidence of the remaining unclarity concerning the distinction between undermining and overriding defeaters, Casullo classifies the defeater according to which reason gets into conflict with itself as an overriding defeater even though he formulates the question 'under what conditions, if any, do conflicts of rational insight *undermine* justification based on such insight?' (p. 169; my italics). Casullo then goes on to classify the poor track record of rational insight as a source of a priori justification in this regard as an undermining defeater. Perhaps these remarks can be reconciled by claiming that the ability of rational insight to provide overriding defeaters to particular *beliefs* generated by itself in turn provides an undermining defeater to itself as a *source*. In that case, the use of Kant's antinomies above illustrates the latter phenomenon.

reflection or introspection, Casullo suggests that popular views about the semantics of natural kinds should provide the model. The notion of experience should be treated as a natural kind and its underlying nature explored by empirical investigations with the five senses as the initial ‘local paradigm’ (pp. 158–159).

While this reviewer is not troubled by the idea that empirical investigations are relevant for answering the question of the existence of a priori justification, he nevertheless has reservations concerning Casullo’s particular suggestion. First, even though the degree of commitment remains unclear, the adoption of this framework will not convince readers who, like this reviewer, are suspicious of the last decades’ natural kinds semantics with its excessive metaphysical luggage.

Second, even granted that framework, an account of the natural kind of experience, not to mention an account of its cosmic supplement, does not ensure a sufficiently high degree of explanatory value and epistemological significance (a possibility Casullo acknowledges on p. 159). Note especially that even if experience indeed constitutes a natural kind and therefore has some differentiating metaphysical and/or scientific properties, it does not follow that experiential sources of justification therefore have any *epistemically significant* properties *qua* experience; and neither, of course, that its cosmic complement of nonexperiential sources have any such properties. At present, with the natural kind account of experience a mere prospect, this proposed concept of experience does not relieve us of this threat. To this reviewer this proposal further highlights the need for a criterial approach for proving, or disproving, the existence of a priori justification.

III

None of the objections raised in this review diminishes the value of Casullo’s thoroughgoing discussion in chapters 7 and 8. Much of the discussion within analytic philosophy in the 20th century did not primarily concern the a priori itself as much as it revolved around its relations with the concepts of necessity and analyticity. Casullo convincingly argues that these discussions are side-tracks that obfuscate the key questions that should be addressed concerning the nature and existence of such justification. Simply put, Casullo’s thesis is that specifying the relationships between the a priori and necessity and analyticity is not necessary in order to answer the questions of what a priori justification is and of whether there is such justification.

Given the groundwork from the previous chapters, it is not a difficult task to sever the links. It follows from the minimal conception of the a priori and the rejection of the criterial arguments that necessity and analyticity are not

constituents of the definition of the a priori and do not serve as criteria. Casullo therefore agrees with Kripke that to prove a certain relation between these notions requires substantial philosophical argument. The author examines some attempt at such arguments, but rejects them all.

In the course of doing so, Casullo provides an excellent discussion in Chapter 7 of Kripke's views on necessity, helping himself to some, but not all, of them. In Chapter 8 the author rehearses his objections against including analyticity in the definition of the a priori or having it as a criterion. Next Casullo poses the question whether there are any other routes from analyticity to the a priori or in the other direction. His well argued answer, to which this reviewer has nothing to add except admiration, is no. In several of the cases that he considers the connection between the a priori and analyticity is assumed rather than proved. For instance, it is question begging to regard synthetic knowledge a priori as somehow mysterious in contrast to at least some cases of analytic knowledge a priori, for example logic, if no account of justification is provided for the latter case. Moreover, when philosophers, who hold this view, make such an attempt, they often end up using those supposedly mysterious terms that they blame the opponents for, like "seeing" various analytic relationships between propositions (p. 220).

IV

Casullo's approach is mainly dialectical in the sense that he typically selects a philosopher representing the position he has carefully distinguished and then goes on to offer penetrating criticism of that particular view. Throughout, the rigor and clarity of the analyses and arguments in this book will hopefully set the standard for future discussions of the a priori. However, as much as this reviewer appreciates the wealth of useful distinctions and stern reasoning displayed in the book, he is still left with a sense of dissatisfaction. Not so much over the lack of any definitive conclusions whether there are a priori justification, but rather with the absence of any interesting candidates for such justification.

In order to reach such a conclusion, the dialectical approach is insufficient. The most straightforward approach for an apriorist would be to specify at least one non-experiential source of justification together with an account of justification. Justification must presumably be defined as a many placed relation and in order to arrive at a full account we need more than just one of the *relata*, i.e. the source. For instance, just as Casullo argues in Chapter 6, we need a specification of justification in terms of truth conduciveness (pp. 171–172) or with the help of some substitute.

Conversely, a straightforward empiricist approach could be adopted as well.

An empiricist would also need to specify a fully developed account of justification in order to reject candidates for nonexperiential sources of justification.

To please this reviewer, the dialectical approach would need to work hand in hand with such a straightforward approach in either direction. In the absence of a straightforward approach, Casullo merely provides the groundwork for such an approach, while this reviewer unfortunately believes a tentative but negative answer already is at hand to the extended existence question.

Irrespective of how we answer the extended existence question, this reviewer has also made the case that Casullo's conception of the a priori threatens to make the project of establishing the existence of a priori justification epistemologically insignificant. But despite these reservations, this reviewer strongly recommends this book for any specialist with an interest in the central epistemological issue of the a priori.⁴

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4. I am grateful to Levi Spectre and to the editor for comments upon an earlier draft of this review-essay.