

ON WRIGHT'S CHARACTERIZATION OF THE A PRIORI

IVETTE FRED

The notion of a priori knowledge has been a main target for skepticism in contemporary philosophy. In order to respond to this form of skepticism, it is urgent that we clarify what the predicate "a priori" applies to, that is, what is *the a priori*? Philip Kitcher's¹ characterization of the notion has the consequence that little of what we intuitively consider knowable a priori comes out as a priori on his account. So his proposal does not provide a good answer to skepticism for this reason (among others). The task is to provide a characterization that better captures our intuitions regarding *the a priori* and, at the same time, does not have the *immediate* consequence that there is little a priori knowledge.

Crispin Wright's work² on a priori knowledge provides a very useful starting point towards the task of clarifying the notion. In this paper I will discuss what I take to be a suggestion which originally Wright makes in his *Frege's Conception of Numbers as Objects*. However, Wright had not developed the suggestion in any detail either in his *Frege* book or in any of his writings. So, the proposal stayed as a suggestion, very interesting, though hardly developed. In some of the Hale-Wright correspondence,³ Wright returns to the task of characterizing *the a priori*. Wright's

¹ Kitcher, Philip, *The Nature of Mathematical Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 24.

² Wright, Crispin, *Frege's Conception of Numbers as Objects*. Aberdeen University Press, 1983, pp. 95–6.

³ The material I will be discussing about Wright's second proposal will be based on Bob Hale's report of their private conversations. (Hale's reference is: Hale, Bob. *Abstract Objects*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1987, Chapter Six "Platonism and Knowledge II: Non-Empirical Knowledge", pp. 123–48.) I shall assume that Hale's report of the conversations is correct.

basic idea here is to account for the experience-independence characteristic of a priori knowledge wholly in terms of the experience-independence of a priori warrants. The problem is that this second proposal is ambiguous. I shall argue for what I take to be the most interesting and ambitious reading of the second proposal. An interesting consequence is that such reading leads us to his original suggestion. In my view, Wright's original suggestion is highly intuitive and simple and, at the same time, fully captures the intuition that lies behind Kant's contention that a priori knowledge is absolutely independent of experience.⁴

Section 1: Wright's proposals

Wright firstly introduced what I shall call "the sensory insulation tank suggestion" in the context of an argument against the causal theory of knowledge, specifically, on how the latter has difficulties in accommodating any kind of a priori knowledge and, in particular, a priori knowledge of necessary truths. The causal theory of knowledge requires the satisfaction of an appropriate causal relation with the world such that the truth-conferring state of affairs upon the statement to be known plays a crucial role. Thus, for the causalist theorist, the problem is that a priori knowledge does not require the fulfillment of any such causal relation with the world.

can room be made by such a picture [the causal theory of knowledge] for any form of knowledge a priori? More specifically, what room can be made for knowledge a priori of necessary truth? The heart of the causal conception is that knowledge is conferred by causal interaction with the world, in which the state of affairs conferring truth upon the statement known is to play *some sort of essential role*. Yet what is distinctive of any piece of knowledge a priori is precisely that it has no essential causal antecedent save a training in certain relevant concepts. *A man can lie suspended in a tank of lukewarm water, blindfolded, ears plugged, etc. —in short, in a state of total sensory insulation— and arrive, if he can concentrate well enough, at end of elementary, and perhaps some less elementary, arithmetical and geometrical truths which he has never thought before.* How, when the events in his consciousness are in this way causally quite unrelated to his present environ-

⁴ Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Norman Kemp Smith. New York: St. Martin's, 1956.

ment, is it possible for him to be exposed to the necessary causal influences?⁵

The proposal is that a priori knowledge can be acquired by a subject in a state of *total* sensory insulation after the subject has had the necessary experiences for the acquisition of the conceptual repertoire necessary to obtain a priori knowledge. Of course, it may be difficult to acquire a priori knowledge in a state of total sensory deprivation, but the point is that it is *possible*. So, the causal theory of knowledge, which requires the satisfaction of an appropriate causal relation with the truth-conferring states of affairs upon the statement to be known as a necessary condition for knowledge, won't be an exhaustive epistemological theory since a priori knowledge would constitute an exception to it.

Wright's notion of an "a priori warrant" (or "a priori justification") is discussed later in Hale's book and in the context of Hale's discussion whether a priori knowledge ought to be indefeasible by experience.⁶ Why does Hale discuss Wright in this connection? Three positions are involved in the context of Hale's discussion of Wright, namely: Kitcher's,⁷ who requires indefeasibility in general as a condition for a priori knowledge, that is, indefeasibility by a priori reasons as well as empirical ones; Hale's, who requires that items of a priori knowledge (as I understand him, these "items" are a priori warrants as well as a priori statements) must be subject only to an a priori defeat in any case (that is, they must be indefeasible by experience and only defeasible a priori); and Wright's, who thinks that the issue of the defeasibility/indefeasibility of a priori warrants and a priori statements is an entirely separate matter from actually having an a priori justification for believing a proposition *p*, or, in the best of cases, having a priori knowledge that *p*.

⁵ Wright, *ibid*, pp. 95–6; my emphasis.

⁶ Hale, *ibid*, note 10, pp. 259–60. Hale distinguishes between strong and weak defeasibility (p. 137). To avoid unnecessary complication, I provide below the use I make of the term.

The property of "defeasibility" applies firstly to warrants and, derivatively, to the beliefs they justify. A warrant (and its associated justified belief(s)) are defeasible when additional information cannot be ruled out which would either compromise our confidence that the warrant was correctly acquired or result in a total evidential picture in which the belief(s) in question are no longer justified.

⁷ Kitcher, *ibid*, pp. 24–7; pp. 88–9.

According to Hale, Wright⁸ has reacted in correspondence to his notion of a priori knowledge as follows:

it [Hale's notion of a priori knowledge] is more than enough, and in fact concedes more to Kitcher's analysis than ought to be conceded. For the proposal in the text allows that, whilst it would be an error to insist upon absolute indefeasibility as a condition of knowledge *a priori*, Kitcher is right, at least, to require indefeasibility by empirical evidence; his mistake consists, from the perspective provided by that proposal, in sliding from there into an overly generous conception of what constitutes defeat by empirical evidence. *But the right way to capture the key notion of experience independence, so the suggestion continues, is not in terms of indefeasibility at all, however characterized, but in terms of availability.*⁹

When Wright affirms that his account is independent of what ought to be said about the issue of defeasibility/indefeasibility of a priori warrants, he means that indefeasibility by experience might be a consequence of his account, but that it does not have to be a necessary condition for warrants and the beliefs they warrant to be a priori. Again, the correctness of his account would be independent from anything that can sensibly be said about the defeasibility/indefeasibility in question. Furthermore, according to Wright, the crucial notion to characterize is the notion of "experience independence" rather than the notions of defeasibility and indefeasibility. The issue of defeasibility/indefeasibility of a priori knowledge is a separate matter. That does not mean, of course, that the issue of defeasibility is not an important one; it is in fact a very important and interesting issue, but Wright's point is that the two issues are separate. Argument is needed to establish a connection between the two and it should never be taken for granted.

As already said, Wright intends to capture the key notion of "experience independence" wholly in terms of the "experience inde-

⁸ Wright is reacting here to the following proposal of Hale:

for knowledge a priori that p our justification for belief that p must not require the truth of any empirical statement. (*Abstract Objects*, p. 137)

Hale offers this proposal as an alleged necessary condition for a priori knowledge.

⁹ Hale, *ibid*, note 10 (chapter 6), p. 259; my emphasis. Since this material originally belongs to the unpublished correspondence Hale-Wright, I think that Hale is paraphrasing Wright (there are no quotation marks in the text).

pendence" of a priori warrants. Hale appears to be paraphrasing Wright's notion of an a priori warrant in the following passages:

any particular *a priori* warrant may *in principle* be constructed by any particular rational subject who has the appropriate concepts, and any such subject may feel its prima facie probative force, irrespective of the other details of his life. *And that this is true independently of what, if anything, should be said about the defeasibility of such warrants not true of empirical warrants.* (ibid; my emphasis)

what is distinctive of an *a priori* warrant is precisely that, given any life sufficient for acquisition of the relevant concepts, *no particular experiences are required to guarantee its availability.* (ibid; my emphasis)

In the first part of the first quote, Wright characterizes the independence of experience characteristic of a priori knowledge in terms of the possibility for any a priori warrant to be constructed, and its cogency being appreciated, by a subject who has the appropriate concepts independently of any other experiences she may be having at that moment. This has to be qualified since for a subject to be in a position to construct an a priori warrant, and to appreciate its purported cogency, she has to be in a state where she can accomplish both things. We need the obtaining of certain experiences—which I called “empirical pre-conditions” (more below)—in order to acquire any knowledge. In the rest of the first quote Wright restates that the issue of the “experience independence” of warrants, and, therefore, the issue of the “experience independence” of a priori knowledge, is a separate issue from the issue of the defeasibility/indefeasibility of warrants. Note that here Wright reiterates the separateness of both issues but in this occasion explicitly in connection to a priori warrants. The issue of the defeasibility/indefeasibility of a priori knowledge is explained (even if only partially) by the defeasibility/indefeasibility of a priori warrants. In the case of a priori warrants, to talk about a priori knowledge being defeasible is to say that a priori warrants, as all warrants, are defeasible.

The proposal in the second quote is ambiguous. The ambiguity involved is seen more clearly—it becomes more salient—when one tries to interpret the view of a priori warrant that Wright offers in his correspondence with Hale, and connects this latter account with his earlier suggestion on a priori knowledge in his *Frege* book.

The crucial question concerns the sense in which *no particular experiences* are required to guarantee the *availability* of an a priori warrant.

Also, what does "availability" mean? As I take it, "availability" means that the subject is able in principle to carry out the (a priori) warrant in a state of total sensory deprivation.

Section 2: How are we to understand Wright's second proposal?

Wright's second proposal is that in order for us to exercise an a priori warrant, no *particular* experience is needed. As I interpret it, an a priori warrant is independent of experience in the sense that *it can be carried out without the need of any particular experience*. But what does it mean to say that "no particular experiences are needed" for an a priori warrant to perform its warranting function? Here is where the ambiguity shows up.

On one reading, "no particular experiences are needed" could mean that *certain specific kinds of experiences are not needed*, leaving it open that some experiences are needed, but just not the same type of experiences, in any instance of a priori knowledge. That is, the proposal is that certain experiences may be necessary but not all of the same kind (or more sharp: not all of the same *particular* kind). This reading though is not attractive because it would imply that a priori knowledge is dependent on experience in an unspecified way.

The distinction between "experiences of the same kind" and "experiences of the same particular kind" becomes important in order to understand the epistemological status of universally empirical knowledge. Examples of propositions which constitute universally empirical knowledge are "There is an external world", "There are physical objects", "Some objects have shapes", etc. It is controversial whether universally empirical knowledge ought to be considered as a priori.¹⁰ It is argued that such knowledge should be considered as a priori since it requires no *particular* kind of experience beyond that needed for the acquisition of the relevant concepts. This is false since, for instance, knowledge that

¹⁰ There is a question whether the absolute generality of these propositions precludes their being confirmable. The claim that these propositions are confirmable is contestable, and has been contested by Ludwig Wittgenstein (in *On Certainty*. Translated by D. Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1969) and Karl Popper's theory of empirical falsification (in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. London: Hutchinson, 1959, revised ed. 1968).

I cannot enter into any detail here about this interesting issue. I only want to clarify that I'm taking the generality and the empirical character of this sort of propositions at face value.

"There are physical objects" *requires* the experience of at least one physical object, but it is crucial to spell out the senses of the "particularities of experiences" and how a priori knowledge is said to be independent of "particular experiences".

Universally empirical knowledge ought not to be regarded as a priori for two reasons at least. First, I observe that even though the *content* of the experience is immaterial (or irrelevant in the sense that it can be an experience of any physical object) in our acquisition of universally empirical knowledge, that knowledge is gained by perception, so it ought to be considered a posteriori. A second reason, related to the first, is that universally empirical knowledge ought not be judged as a priori because being based on perception, it simply does not raise the traditional problems of a priori knowledge.

The traditional conception of a priori knowledge is too vague, it is not articulated enough, to decide alleged cases of universally empirical knowledge. Contemporaneously, Kitcher¹¹ had considered the problem of universally empirical knowledge coming out as a priori, but although his analysis points to the right direction, in my opinion, it is not sharp enough to explain why this knowledge is not a priori since he does not elaborate on the notion of the particularity of experiences, for example. I have attempted to provide this missing part of his argument.

By the phrase "experiences of the same kind" I mean that, for instance, to know that our knowledge is about physical objects requires experiences of the same general kind: they must all be experiences of physical objects. In contrast, to know the same does not require "experiences of physical objects of the same particular kind". That is: the experiences involved are not particular in the sense that the particularity of the objects we experience does not matter. We don't have to have only experiences of tables, for example, or even more particularly, tables of a certain size, color, or shape, in order to know, if we have knowledge of the external world, that there are physical objects, let's say.

Does universally empirical knowledge obey the first reading of the phrase "no particular experiences are needed"? If so, that would mean that it comes out as a priori according to the first reading. The first reading involves the need for certain experiences but also involves the irrelevance of the type of experiences. For instance, again, to know the proposition that "There are physical objects" one has to have some expe-

¹¹ Kitcher, *ibid*, p. 31.

rience with physical objects, but it does not matter which ones, so the particularity of the object and, therefore, the content of the experience of the particular object is irrelevant in the sense that it can be an experience of any physical object. Nevertheless, one could argue that the experiences needed are of the same kind in the sense (perhaps weak) that they have to be experiences of physical objects to justify the claim that "There are physical objects" even though it does not matter which physical object is experienced. So, it seems that universal empirical knowledge would not obey the first reading if we are to understand "no particular experiences are needed" as no experiences are needed all of the same *particular* kind", and, therefore, won't come out as a priori according to the first reading.

What is the problem if universally empirical knowledge does satisfy the first reading? I already discarded the first reading anyway. Also, according to the new distinction between "experiences of the same kind" and "experiences of the same particular kind" it comes out as a priori if we are to understand "no particular experiences are needed" as that *certain specific kinds of experiences are not needed* leaving it open that some experiences are needed, even "experiences of the same kind", but not "experiences of the same particular kind", in any instance of a priori knowledge. Actually, this constitutes a more powerful reason to reject the first reading since universally empirical knowledge does not seem to be a priori than to simply say that it is not attractive that a priori knowledge is dependent on experience in an unspecified way. Of course, the point is that the unspecified way in which a priori knowledge is dependent on experience may involve counter-intuitive cases of knowledge coming out as a priori. As a matter of fact, universally empirical knowledge is an illustration of supposedly knowledge a priori being dependent on experience in an unspecified way which is problematic.

It is worth saying that if Quine's holism of confirmation were correct, then the first reading would be incorrect. The reason is because the same would be true of empirical warrants as well: certain experiences may be necessary but not of the same kind. According to confirmation holism, empirical warrants can warrant in an indirect way such that some experiences may be needed, but not all of the same kind.¹²

¹² Quine, W.V.O., "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" in *From a Logical Point Of View*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980.

A second reading of Wright's phrase is: "no particular experience is needed" in the sense that *any particular experience* the subject knower has at the moment of carrying out an a priori warrant is *irrelevant*. In other words, the subject can be having certain experiences, but they are irrelevant in terms of his a priori justification; he could be having *any* experience because it would not matter in what concerns his acquisition of a priori knowledge.

At this point, an important qualification of the second reading (and third reading below) is needed: the second reading has to accommodate the fact that certain experiences are necessary in the acquisition of any knowledge, including a priori knowledge. I have discussed this point before. Furthermore, it needs to be specified that a priori knowledge is not possible if one is having *any* experience since if one is too drunk one is likely to consider one unable to know the belief acquired by following a long (or even a short) proof, for example. One may not even believe the belief in question since one does not rely in the state of mind one happens to be in. Now these necessary experiences are not playing a justificatory role in the a priori justification. They are rather *pre-conditions* that have to obtain for us to be able to obtain *any* knowledge at all. This dependence points out to another distinction that needs to be drawn.

There is an important question that ought to be addressed: what are and what are not reasons for believing something? Obviously, different sorts of reasons (a priori or empirical) are appealed to depending of what we take to be justified in believing. For example, a premise in a proof for the reasoning that p or an assumption like "I'm intelligent enough to construct the proof that p" in the reasoning for the conclusion that "I have a proof that p and am fully justified in believing that p".

Another related distinction has to be made in connection to the role of statements in justifications. A statement plays a justificatory role in a justification for p if it is playing a role in justifying *the truth of p*: otherwise it is not playing a justificatory role for the truth that p. Though a statement may be playing a justificatory role for q, related to p, in the sense that it expresses a pre-condition for our knowing the truth of p. For example, when p is the conclusion of inferential a priori knowledge,¹³ then any of the premises in the proof is playing a justificatory

¹³ Inferential a priori knowledge is contrasted with basic a priori knowledge. Basic a priori knowledge is knowledge which is not obtained by any inference from other

role for the truth that p (in short: for p): However, q , let's say, "I follow the proof for p " (which implies the truth of r : "I am alert enough at the moment I am following the proof that p ") is not playing a justificatory role for the truth that p (neither r is playing such a role) but rather it expresses a precondition for my being able to obtain inferential a priori knowledge that p . Actually, the statement " r " is partly expressing a more basic pre-condition since it involves alertness which we take to be necessary for the acquisition of any knowledge.

Universally empirical knowledge does not come out as a priori according to this second reading because some experiences are needed for that knowledge, for example, the experience of at least one physical object to know that there are physical objects. It may *appear* that the contrary is the case because of the fact that any particular experience of any physical object is enough for such knowledge, that is, any particular experience of a physical object would do, the particularity of the object is irrelevant. Nevertheless, we cannot forget what is crucial: that the experience in question is not only *relevant* but also *necessary* for that knowledge, and that is what makes it a posteriori instead of a priori. According to the second reading, the experiences the subject is having at the time of having a priori knowledge are *irrelevant* for the possession of a priori knowledge. Now let me move quickly to the third reading.

A (third) more ambitious reading constitutes *that no experiences at all*, not particular or otherwise, are needed to construct an a priori warrant. Of course, Wright leaves room for experiences that enable us to acquire the necessary concepts for the acquisition of a priori knowledge, the obtaining of the empirical pre-conditions, and the experience of entertaining the proposition to be known a priori, but the idea is that no experiences are needed beyond those. In my view, this (third) reading is the one that corresponds, or is perfectly analogous, at the level of warrants, with the earlier suggestion in Wright's *Frege on a priori knowledge*; and it is the one I am attracted to.

There is a question whether the second and third readings are logically equivalent. That is, whether to say: (a) "no particular experience

premises. For example, elementary arithmetical truths like " $2 + 2 = 4$ " and trivially analytic truths like "All bachelors are unmarried men" are considered items of basic a priori knowledge. In contrast, inferential a priori knowledge is knowledge obtained by inference from premises already known a priori. For example, the conclusion of an argument constitutes inferential a priori knowledge given that the premises in the inference are already known a priori.

beyond those for the acquisition of the relevant concepts is needed to obtain a priori knowledge" —which I take to be logically equivalent to (a¹) "*any* experience is *irrelevant* after the acquisition of the conceptual repertoire needed to obtain a priori knowledge"— and to say (b) "no experience *at all* beyond those for concept acquisition is needed to obtain a priori knowledge" is to say the same thing. Wright seems to consider this possibility.¹⁴ But if they were logically equivalent, then why do we need the idea of an insulation tank at all? If we could have a priori knowledge having any kind of experiences since statements expressing them would not be playing a *justificatory* role in our acquisition of a priori knowledge, then why do we need to be in a state of sensory deprivation: what is the force of that idea? Do we have to get rid of the second reading? I will argue that we don't.

The second and third readings are logically equivalent when one is to consider *only* how they relate to a priori knowledge. However, their logical equivalence with respect to a priori knowledge has to be compatible with an important difference between the two epistemic situations they are permitting; actually, the question whether it is possible to say that these readings are logically equivalent and, in the same breath, recognizing an important difference between the two in terms of what they permit, is the misgiving I have for conceding that these two readings are logically equivalent. Let me explain.

The second and third readings differ in an important respect: in the second case a subject can obtain a priori knowledge as well as a posteriori knowledge. There is no question about conflating the two cases since the need for experiences in each case is different: in the a priori case, some experiences are needed but the statements expressing them don't play a justificatory role in our a priori justification for the truth of the statement to be known; and in the empirical case, apart from the empirical statements expressing the obtention of the required empirical preconditions, there are also empirical statements which play a justificatory role in our a posteriori justification for the truth of the statement to be known. According to the third case, by contrast, we can only acquire a priori knowledge. In my opinion, that is why the third reading is more

¹⁴ We have discussed this passage on p. 5. Let me quote the part I am thinking of:

any particular *a priori* warrant may in principle be constructed by any particular rational subject who has the appropriate concepts, and any such subject may feel its *prima facie* probative force, *irrespective of the other details of his life*. (Hale, note 10, p. 259; my emphasis)

interesting since it concerns only a priori knowledge, and makes, therefore, more poignant its problematic nature, namely: how a priori knowledge can be obtained if it is in tension with something we are at least inclined to think is involved in other cases of knowledge, namely, the satisfaction of an appropriate causal condition? How can it be obtained in a state of total sensory deprivation? So, even though in a strict sense a priori knowledge is possible in the second case as well as in the third, the third captures exclusively and more fully the problematic nature of a priori knowledge making it more urgent to explain its *possibility*. The third reading only concerns the possibility of a priori knowledge. This reading is more ambitious and, therefore, more interesting, because it makes the "independence of experience" more salient or bigger.

Universally empirical knowledge does not count as a priori according to the third reading because beyond the specified experiences, *no experiences at all*, not particular or otherwise, are needed to obtain a priori knowledge.

The task at hand is how to develop the third suggested reading of Wright's second proposal—which is analogous, at the level of warrants, to his original suggestion for characterizing knowledge a priori—as to constitute a definition of a priori knowledge. To this task I shall turn on another occasion.

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