

## A Priori Anti-Skeptical Justification

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### 1. Introduction

If we know that we have hands, then we know that we are not handless brains in vats. But how do we know that we are not handless brains in vats? Suppose our knowledge that we are handless brains in vats were a priori. Then we would have some contingent a priori knowledge: it's metaphysically possible that I should have been a bodiless brain in a vat instead of a normally embodied and fully handed human being. Nonetheless, this is not an *epistemic* possibility: I know that I am not a handless brain in a vat. If this knowledge is a priori, I have a priori knowledge that a certain metaphysical possibility is not actual.

I've found that when I've suggested this view to others, they typically respond with disbelief. Even philosophers who have expressed sympathy with the idea that we know a priori that we're not bodiless brains in vats do so with trepidation. Stuart Cohen comes close to endorsing the idea that it is "a priori rational" to deny that we are bodiless brains in vats, but says that his preference for this view "may be mostly a statement about which bullet I am most prepared to bite."<sup>1</sup> But is it really bullet-biting

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen (2000). Keith DeRose ((2000b), (ms)) is more upbeat than Cohen on this score.

to say what I've said? It doesn't seem that way to *me*.<sup>2</sup> It seems to me that if I *do* know that I'm not a bodiless brain in a vat, the explanation for why this is so will resemble the explanation for how I know things that have been typically regarded as a priori more than the explanation for how I know things that have typically been regarded as a posteriori. I can't see that I'm not a handless brain in a vat.<sup>3</sup> I can see that I have hands, which entails that I am not a handless brain in a vat, but there are strong reasons for supposing that my visual knowledge that I have hands is impotent as evidence that I am not a handless brain in a vat.<sup>4</sup> Some have suggested that I can know that I am not a handless brain in a vat on the basis of abductive inference: they say that the brain in a vat hypothesis does not explain my evidence as well as do alternative hypotheses.<sup>5</sup> I have serious doubts about this suggestion. First, it does not seem clear to me that the brain in a vat hypothesis is any worse than any hypothesis that is incompatible with it. Second, I am far less confident in those hypotheses I do clearly believe on the basis of abductive inference than I am that I am not a bodiless brain in a vat.

In this paper I'll begin to sketch an account of how I might know a priori that I'm not a handless brain in a vat. I'll focus on describing how I can have a priori justification to believe that I'm not. I'll spend some time arguing that the kind of basis I suggest I have for my justification that I'm not a brain in a vat should be regarded as a priori. But I'm not *so* concerned to convince you that this justification is going to be a clear-cut case

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<sup>2</sup> I'm not so sure about Cohen's suggestion – that it's a priori "rational" to deny that you're a brain in a vat. A lot turns on what Cohen has in mind by saying it's "rational".

<sup>3</sup> Greco (2002) suggests that he knows he is not a brain in a vat "because I can see that I am not." I think this is no more plausible than saying that I can see that a bill isn't a perfect counterfeit.

<sup>4</sup> Discuss transmission failure literature here.

<sup>5</sup> Cite Vogel here.

of “the a priori” in *all* of the senses in which philosophers use that label. There are a number of related distinctions that typically get invoked by the a priori / a posteriori distinction. That distinction might be – in fact, I suspect it is – too coarse-grained to be of much fine philosophical use.<sup>6</sup> “A priori” is a piece of philosophical jargon. There is no ordinary language court of appeal we can turn to in an effort to settle disagreements about what is and what isn’t “a priori”. But unlike some philosophical jargon, it has no clear definition, and has been used by different philosophers to mean different things. So, for example, I wouldn’t want to commit myself to the idea that my justification for thinking that I’m not a bodiless brain in a vat is apt to yield “high grade theoretical knowledge”.<sup>7</sup> This justification is not based on a proof, a philosophical argument, or a clear grasp of concepts; it’s not something I can or do arrive at by tracing out an argument from self-evident axioms. But I think that it is “absolutely independent of all experience” in an important way that I’ll attempt to flesh out.<sup>8</sup>

Even if I have this justification, it might not be the kind of justification that can serve as an adequate basis for my *knowing* that I’m not a bodiless brain in a vat. This is a problem I look forward to working on more in the future.

## 2. Justification

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<sup>6</sup> See Williamson (2007) for a similar suggestion.

<sup>7</sup> The phrases are from Bealer (2000).

<sup>8</sup> That phrase, of course, is Kant’s, and the closest thing we have to a definition of “a priori”.

I use the term “justification” in the following way. I say that you “have justification to believe  $p$ ”, or sometimes just that you “have justification for  $p$ ”, to mean that, from your perspective, it’s epistemically appropriate for you to believe  $p$ .<sup>9</sup> It might be possible for you to have practical or moral reasons for believing  $p$ . If so, my use of “justification” implies that if it’s appropriate for you to believe  $p$ , but *only* for moral or practical reasons, you do not “have justification” for  $p$ . For example, it might be that if you believe you’re going to lose weight, you’ll increase your chances of succeeding in doing so. So if you want to lose weight then from the practical point of view, you should believe that you are going to lose weight. But if this is the only way in which you should believe that you’re going to lose weight, then you don’t count as having justification for that belief in my sense. Having justification for  $p$  means having epistemic justification.

If you have a justified belief that  $p$ , then you have justification to believe  $p$ , and you believe it on the basis of whatever gives you that justification, and you’re not doing anything else epistemically irresponsible with respect to that belief. Because you can have justification without a justified belief, but not vice versa, we’ll focus here on justification – in the lingo, we’re concerned with “propositional” rather than “doxastic” justification.

You can also have what many call “prima facie” justification for  $p$  without having “all things considered” justification for  $p$ . You have prima facie justification to believe  $p$

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<sup>9</sup> Reynolds puts it this way: “Justification, let us say, is how knowledge appears to the knower, how it seems ‘from the inside’” (Reynolds 1998, 531). If it’s only epistemically appropriate for you to believe things you’re in a position to know – a plausible-seeming thought – then I whole-heartedly endorse Reynolds’s characterization. (However, I *don’t* endorse how he goes on to explain his characterization: “More formally:  $S$  is justified in believing that  $p$  if and only if it really appears to  $S$  that he has knowledge that  $p$ .” Provided you can know something without its “really appearing to you” that you know it – and I’m fairly sure that you can – this is too strong.

if, taking only some particular aspect of your perspective into account, you have justification to believe  $p$ . You might have prima facie justification for  $p$  but not all things considered justification for  $p$  if, say, you *also* have prima facie justification for not- $p$ . Again, because prima facie justification is weaker than all things considered justification, we'll focus on the former.

Since having justification is a matter of how things are from your perspective, it's "internal" in one important sense. My perspective is identical with the perspective of my bodiless brain in a vat twin; hence, I have justification to believe  $p$  just in case he does.<sup>10</sup> Whatever *gives* me justification for  $p$  is going to be something that's a fact about how things are from my perspective. Or if my having justification for something is just a brute fact, then it is also a brute fact about anyone with the same perspective.

### **3. Some Sources of Justification and The A Priori / A Posteriori Distinction**

There are many sources of justification that are naturally regarded as a posteriori. Here is a partial list:

Your current perceptual experiences.

Your current introspective experience of your own mental states.

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<sup>10</sup> This oversimplifies; when the content of  $p$  is dependent upon facts about my environment (e.g., "That's a tree"), my BIV twin won't have justification to believe  $p$ , but  $p^*$ , where believing  $p$  and believing  $p^*$  are states that are indiscernible from the perspective of subjects that are in them.

Your current proprioceptive experience of the positions of the parts of your body.

Your current interoceptive experience of your internal organs.

Your memories of things you became aware of via one of the above sources.

The list is by no means exhaustive. There are many sources of a posteriori justification. At least some of these sources are sometimes taken to be “basic” or “non-inferential”; others are typically not. And of course there are many accounts of what *makes* each a source of justification. But only a wild skeptic would deny that these *are* sources of justification.

By contrast, there is no uncontroversial list of a priori sources of justification. Defenders of the a priori themselves have a hard time describing even a single source in a way that skeptics about the a priori don't find mysterious or strange. Indeed, skepticism about the a priori is often *fueled* by the purported difficulty of imagining what kind of source there could be for a priori justification.<sup>11</sup> Thus defenders of the a priori expend significant energy on explaining how there could be such a source.

I am inclined to characterize a priori justification negatively: it's simply justification that is not a posteriori. A priori justification is not dependent – in a way that we'll need to flesh out – upon any justification you get from experience, where we

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Devitt (2005): “[W]hat we need if we are to take the *a priori* way seriously is a *positive* characterization, not just a negative one. We need to describe a process for justifying a belief that is different from the empirical way and that we have some reason for thinking is actual.” Devitt thinks it's obscure how this could be done; hence his skepticism about a priori justification.

understand experience as involving the sources listed above. One thing that seems to unite all of the a posteriori sources mentioned is that they can be understood in some sense as involving direct or indirect *causal connection* with the facts in whose existence they give us justification to believe. Our capacity for perceptual experience consists in our possessing an array of organs that are causally sensitive to information about the world around us. Likewise with our capacity for “internal” experience involving proprioception, interoception, and so on. Our memory-based justification likewise involves a causal link with certain facts, albeit a less direct one. If we think that a source of justification has to be understood in casual terms, then it *is* somewhat mysterious how we could have a source of justification that wasn’t a posteriori.<sup>12</sup>

But we shouldn’t take it for granted that it’s appropriate to believe *p* only if your basis for doing so is that you have some direct or indirect casual link to information about *p*. At least, there *seem* to be many propositions we’re justified in believing even though it’s not at *all* obvious that we have a causal connection with the facts that make those propositions true, or that, if we *do*, the nature of that connection is quite obscure. Many such propositions supply traditional paradigms of beliefs that are justified a priori:

If *p* then not not *p*.

There are no round squares.

If there are five peanuts, there are more than four peanuts.

One ought not to cause unnecessary suffering.

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<sup>12</sup> Mention Goldman here.

And the like.

Friends of the a priori often say that we have a priori justification to believe such things because of they are revealed to us in “intuition”, by “rational insight”, as “intellectual seemings” and so on. If justification always involves a causal link, then I agree with the critics of the a priori that it’s mysterious how intuition, rational insight, intellectual seeming, and so on give us justification. But if justification doesn’t require a causal link, then I don’t see what the problem is. Would someone really want to *deny* that it’s intuitive that if  $p$  then not not  $p$ , or that there are no round squares, or that one ought not to cause unnecessary suffering? Having acknowledged that these things *are* intuitive, it seems unprincipled to say that the fact that they’re intuitive *couldn’t* make it epistemically appropriate to believe these propositions unless it were already clear how something’s being intuitive *could* involve a causal link with its being true.

Of course as philosophers we want to understand what it is in virtue of which these a priori sources should give us justification. And one way of doing so would be to attempt to bolster the credentials of a putative source of a priori justification by providing it with a surrogate for the causal connections that characterize the sources of a posteriori justification. George Bealer, for example, has developed an ambitious argument aimed at showing that having the “right” intuitions about the truth of modal claims such as “necessarily,  $p$ ” is a precondition for determinately possessing the concepts involved in the embedded proposition. He thus concludes that one’s intuitions about the truth of modal claims should be regarded as evidence for or against those

claims.<sup>13</sup> But achieving this deep philosophical understanding should hardly be a prerequisite for allowing that these sources *do* give us justification. We ordinarily *do* count intuition and insight and intellectual seeming as sources of justification. To rule them out from the get-go on the grounds that it's mysterious how they *could be* sources of justification seems a rather slavish adherence to doctrinaire empiricism.

In the next section, I'll say a bit about a source of justification that we all accept, and that we have good reason to regard as a priori.

#### 4. The Obvious

Some things are obvious. When something is obvious, we are typically inclined to believe that it is true. And, I suggest, this inclination is epistemically above board. Thus, an epistemic principle:

*Obviousness.* If it's obvious to S that *p*, then S has prima facie justification for *p*.

I'm not sure how to defend Obviousness; it's obvious! By saying that the justification you get for *p* in virtue of its being obvious to you is prima facie, I leave it open that the obviousness of something can (indeed, can *easily*) be overridden by other considerations. Something's being obvious doesn't give you any ironclad or indefeasible

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<sup>13</sup> See Bealer (2000).

justification to believe it. Rather, its being obvious just means that, considered from the aspect of your perspective whereby  $p$ 's obvious to you, you ought to believe  $p$ .

Something can be obvious to me without being obvious to you, or obvious to me at one time but not at another; I'm not sure there's an interesting category of things that are obvious *tout court*. When I think really hard about it, Peirce's Law (i.e., that  $((p \supset p) \supset p) \supset p$ ) is obvious to me; just mention it, though, and it's not. It's never been obvious to me that objective act-utilitarianism is false; if I'm to go by what they say, though, this is eminently obvious to others. Probably everything's obvious to God, and nothing's obvious to an extreme and committed skeptic.

Sometimes obviousness is a posteriori. It's obvious that there's a paper clip on the desk in front of me. ("How do you know that's a paper clip?" "Look – obviously, that's a paper clip!") It's obvious to me that I had eggs on toast for breakfast. It's obvious to me that I have a toothache. It's obvious to me that I need to lose weight. When I got home last night it was obvious to me that the cats had been scratching on the carpet again.

Sometimes, though, obviousness is a priori. Each of the propositions I listed above as examples of things for which we have a priori justification is obvious to me. But the obviousness of the nonexistence of round squares does not depend upon any experiences I've ever had. What experiences *could* it depend upon? I've never *seen* that there are no round squares; I don't *introspect* it; I can't *sense* it in any literal way. It becomes obvious to me just by thinking about it.

In my case at least, this seems to be the best way to describe how things stand with the proposition that I'm not a bodiless brain in a vat. That's obvious to me. I don't see that I'm not a bodiless brain in a vat.<sup>14</sup> I don't *sense* it. It's not obvious because I remember someone having told me. None of my faculties that serve as sources of a posteriori justification seems to be operative here. I just think about it, and it's obvious.

If that's right, then given Obviousness, I have prima facie a priori justification to believe that I'm not a bodiless brain in a vat. I think it *is* right, so I think I *do*. But there is an important objection. To state it clearly, we'll need to consider an important distinction.

## 5. Inferential vs. Non-Inferential Justification

The distinction between inferential and non-inferential justification is ubiquitous, though hard to pin down.<sup>15</sup>

Sometimes, you have justification for some proposition only because you have justification for some *other* proposition. I read a headline screaming that the Patriots lost the Super Bowl; this gives me justification to believe that the Giants won. *That's* not what I read, though. My justification for believing that the Giants won depends in part upon my independent justification for believing that the Patriots lost. Thus, this justification is inferential.

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<sup>14</sup> Again, *pace* Greco (2002).

<sup>15</sup> See Pryor (2005) for a similar initial characterization of the distinction.

Is there any *non*-inferential justification? Non-inferential justification would be justification that doesn't depend upon any other justification you have. Many have thought that the only cases of non-inferential justification were instances where some proposition was self-evident, or where it was inconceivable that the proposition should be false. But epistemologists have relaxed about this, and I am happy about that, because I don't think there's any reason to suppose that this is the case.<sup>16</sup> Here are some examples.

When you seem to see a red sphere in front of you, you have justification to believe that there's a red sphere in front of you. This justification doesn't depend upon any justification you have to believe anything else; for example, it doesn't depend upon your justification to believe that you seem to see that there's a red sphere in front of you.

When you feel an itch in your foot, you have justification to believe that your foot itches. That doesn't depend upon any justification you have to believe anything else; for example, it doesn't depend upon any justification you have to believe you have a foot.

When it's obvious to you that if P then not not P, you have justification to believe that if P then not not P. This doesn't depend upon any justification you have to believe anything else; for example, it doesn't depend upon any justification you have to believe that everything is entailed by the conjunction of P and not P.

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<sup>16</sup> Cite Pryor, Huemer, some direct realists.

But many things that are obvious to you are obvious to you in part because you have justification to believe something else. It's obvious to me that I need to stop spending so much money, but that's because I know that my debt-to-income ratio is too high. It's obvious to me that we're about to run out of gas, but that's because I know that the gas gauge reads 'E'. In cases like these, its being obvious to you that something is true does suffice for you to have justification to believe it, but this justification is *inferential*.<sup>17</sup>

Now we're in a position to voice the important objection. I grant, the objector begins, that it is obvious to you that you're not a bodiless brain in a vat. But this is only because you have a posteriori justification to believe lots of things that are incompatible with that proposition. For example, you have a posteriori justification to believe that you have hands, and this is incompatible with your being a bodiless brain in a vat. And that's what makes it obvious to you that you aren't one. So the justification you thereby get is inferential. And clearly, when you have inferential justification to believe something, that justification inherits the epistemic status of what it depends on. So, since this justification depends on your a posteriori justification to believe you have hands, it's not a priori.

To respond to the objection, we need to draw another distinction.

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<sup>17</sup> Jeshion (2000) claims that all obviousness is non-inferential; not only that, but it's based on a clear grasp of concepts. While non-inferential obviousness based on a clear grasp of concepts is an interesting and philosophically important kind of obviousness, it's hardly plausible that this is the only kind of obviousness.

## 6. The Kind of Dependence That Makes Justification Inferential

My initial characterization of the distinction between inferential and non-inferential justification was this: that inferential justification depends upon your having some other justification, while non-inferential justification does not. But this is too coarse.

Understood one way, it leads to the conclusion that there is no non-inferential justification. Understood another way, it does not.

Suppose you're a creature of whom the following two things are true:

- (a) Necessarily, when you seem to see that  $p$ , you get prima facie non-inferential justification to believe  $p$ .
  
- (b) Necessarily, when you seem to see that  $p$ , you get prima facie justification to believe that you seem to see that  $p$ .

We don't want our characterization of non-inferential justification to entail that there is no possible creature of whom (a) and (b) are true. But applying our initial characterization might make it appear that such a creature *is* impossible. Suppose you seem to see that  $p$ , and thus, by (a), have non-inferential justification to believe  $p$ . Given (b), this justification depends upon your having justification to believe that you seem to see that  $p$ : if you didn't have *that* justification, you wouldn't seem to see that  $p$ ,

and hence wouldn't have the justification you do to believe  $p$ . Thus (a) and (b) cannot both be true.

So the notion of dependence that characterizes inferential justification needs to be refined. Here's how I suggest doing so. *One* way that your justification for  $p$  might depend upon your having justification for  $q$  is this: your justification to believe  $p$  is based on some evidence, and  $q$  is that evidence. It's because you have justification for  $q$  and  $q$  evidentially supports  $p$  that you have justification to believe  $p$ . *That's* how I think we should understand the kind of dependence that's characteristic of inferential justification. I'll say that some justification for  $p$  is *evidentially dependent* upon having justification for  $q$  when the former is dependent upon the latter in virtue of the fact that  $q$  is evidence for  $p$ , and that any case of inferential justification is a case of evidential dependence. This characterization leaves it open that there should be a creature of whom (a) and (b) are both true: though such a creature's visually-based justification for  $p$  might depend upon her having justification to believe that she seems to see that  $p$ , this need *not* be in virtue of the fact that the latter proposition is evidence for the former. The *non-evidential* dependence of some justification upon some other does not make the former inferential.

I think that this should not be a controversial way of understanding inferential justification. The idealized model of inferential justification is justification you get by running through an argument, accepting the premises, inferring from the premises that the conclusion is true, and thereby accepting the conclusion. The premises are evidence for the conclusion; this is why, upon accepting the premises, you are rationally obliged

to accept the conclusion. So inferential justification for  $p$ , understood along the lines of this idealized picture, is justification that rests on some evidence you have for  $p$ .

This distinction echoes another that's commonly drawn between the so-called "enabling" and "evidential" dependence upon experience of some putative a priori justification.<sup>18</sup> For example, suppose that I couldn't entertain the proposition that red is a color if I'd never had an experience as of something's being red (I think this is false, but just suppose). So whatever justification I have for believing that red is a color depends upon my experiences as of red things. But it doesn't seem to be that these experiences furnish me with *evidence* that red is a color. They just *enable* me to entertain the proposition. I'm unhappy with this way of casting the distinction, however, because the "enabling" vs. "evidential" labels suggest that the only way some justification can non-evidentially depend upon some other piece of justification is for the latter to "enable" you to have the former. As our example appears to illustrate, this isn't so: there, your non-inferential justification to believe  $p$  depends upon your having justification to believe that you seem to see  $p$ , though this isn't because having the latter "enables you to have" the former.

Now let's return to the objection. The claim was that it is obvious to me that I'm not a bodiless brain in a vat because I have lots of a posteriori justification to believe other things. Hence, the objection concludes, my justification to believe that I'm not a bodiless brain in a vat is inferential, and given the nature of the justification it depends upon, a posteriori.

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<sup>18</sup> See Burge (1993), Williamson (2007).

But with the distinction between evidential and non-evidential dependence in mind, we can see that the claim isn't sufficient to motivate the conclusion. What the claim *needs* to be is this: it's obvious to me that I'm not a bodiless brain because I have lots of a posteriori justified evidence that I'm not. So my justification to believe that I'm not a brain in a vat evidentially depends upon some a posteriori justification, and hence it's inferential.

But I think we have good reason to deny that the fact that it's obvious to me that I'm not a bodiless brain in a vat *does* evidentially depend upon my a posteriori justification to believe various things. As I've argued elsewhere, it doesn't seem that my a posteriori justification to believe things that are incompatible with my being a brain in a vat *can* function as evidence that I'm not a brain in a vat.<sup>19</sup> So if I *do* have justification to believe that I'm not a brain in a vat, it can't be because I have a posteriori evidence that I'm not.

Leaving that other argument aside, though, the suggestion that its being obvious to me that I'm not a bodiless brain in a vat evidentially depends upon my a posteriori justification to believe things about the world around me seems to get the psychological facts wrong. Certainly I wouldn't elucidate the fact that it's obvious to me that I'm not a brain in a vat by citing some a posteriori evidence. I wouldn't say, "Well, it's obvious that I'm not a bodiless brain in a vat; I mean, my foot itches, for goodness sake!" Asked what evidence makes it obvious that I'm not a bodiless brain in a vat, I wouldn't know *what* to say. "I don't know – but it's obvious!" In typical cases of inferential

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<sup>19</sup> Pynn (ms).

justification, this is not how things are. I *am* typically in a position to say at least *something* about what makes a proposition obvious to me when that obviousness is evidentially dependent upon some other justification I have. “It’s obvious that we’re about to run out of gas – the gauge is below E!” “It’s obvious that someone shot Kennedy – he just died of a gunshot wound!”

Of course I don’t want to insist that we are able, just by introspection, to accurately report which of our beliefs are based on evidence and which are not. If we were, then there wouldn’t be any controversy here! But surely we ought to at least respect the fact that, psychologically, we don’t seem to treat any of our a posteriori beliefs as evidence that we’re not brains in vats. If there’s a pressing enough reason to say that we do, then perhaps we’ll need to give up on how things seem. Yet I think we can respect both the fact that we don’t treat our a posteriori beliefs as evidence that we’re not brains in vats, *and* the point made by the objector, that the latter does seem in some way to depend upon the former.

It’s not implausible to suggest, as the objector does, that the fact that it’s obvious that I’m not a bodiless brain in a vat depends in some sense upon my having a posteriori justification to believe lots of other things. In the next section, I’ll say more about how I think we should understand the nature of this dependence, and give a positive argument that it shouldn’t be regarded as rendering the former a posteriori.

## **7. The Nature of the Dependence in This Case: Causal**

It's easy to imagine ways in which I might lose my justification to believe that I'm not a bodiless brain in a vat. Suppose I learn by a posteriori means that some scientists have been working on envatting technologies, and that mysterious disappearances have started to be reported. It might well no longer be obvious to me in those circumstances that I'm not a brain in a vat.

This shows that my justification to believe that I'm not a brain in a vat exhibits a kind of *negative* dependence upon my experiential justification.<sup>20</sup> If I *did* have a posteriori justification to believe certain things, it *wouldn't* be obvious to me that I'm not a brain in a vat, and hence I wouldn't have the justification I actually do. But this kind of dependence isn't usually thought to rob some state of its a priori status: I can imagine a course of experience that would undermine my justification to believe that 151 is the 13<sup>th</sup> prime – if, for example, you told me that I had skipped number 11 when counting the primes – but this doesn't seem to indicate that this justification is not a priori.<sup>21</sup>

Does my justification to believe that I'm not a brain in a vat exhibit any *positive* dependence upon my experiential justification? Suppose I've been in a coma for many years. This morning I awoke to find myself apparently alone in a hospital bed, numb and deaf and paralyzed and mute and with only the dimmest memories of my long gone normal life. Would it be obvious to me upon waking that I wasn't a bodiless brain in a vat? My sense is that it wouldn't: under those circumstances, thinking about the proposition that I'm a bodiless brain in a vat wouldn't generate in me the sense that it's

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<sup>20</sup> See Audi (1987), Pryor (2004, forthcoming).

<sup>21</sup> See Casullo (2003) for discussion. Kitcher (1980) disagrees.

obviously false. But this wouldn't be because I had any reason to think that I *was*. It seems that having a suitably impoverished body of experiential justification can also rob me of the sense that it's obvious that I'm not a brain in a vat, and hence my justification to believe that I'm not. This suggests that this justification *does* depend positively upon my experiential justification.

Ordinarily, when it visually appears to me that *p* is the case, I unhesitatingly and confidently believe *p* in response. And I am justified in doing so. My perceptual experiences give me justification to believe that things are the way that they present them as being. What if it *weren't* obvious to me that I'm not a bodiless brain in a vat? Suppose that when I consider the proposition, it's not obvious. I think that this would pretty severely undermine my ordinary perceptual justification. If it's not obvious to me that I'm not a brain in a vat, it doesn't seem that I'm justified in believing, just on the basis of my sensory experience, that I have hands. "Though it's not obvious to me that I'm not a brain in a vat, still, I can tell that I have hands because I seem to see them." Something's gone epistemically wrong with someone who says something like this.

So it's only if it's obvious to me that I'm not a brain in a vat that my perceptual experience can yield the justification that it does. Perhaps, then, the normal operation of my perceptual faculties *causes* it to be obvious to me that I'm not a brain in a vat. My perceptual systems are humming along nicely, epistemically supporting a rich, coherent, vivid body of beliefs about the external world. In order for everything to go smoothly, it needs to be obvious to me that I'm not a brain in a vat. So that's part of what a well-functioning perceptual system does: it makes it obvious to me that I'm not a brain in a

vat. None of the experiences themselves makes this obvious; rather, the normal operation of the faculties that generate them does. This obviousness, in turn, gives me justification to believe I'm not, thus ensuring that the experiences delivered by my perceptual faculties will be able to perform their epistemic duties. If this or something like it is correct, it would explain why it wouldn't be obvious to someone with a severely-enough impoverished perceptual experience that she wasn't a brain in a vat. Her faculties are defective in a number of ways, and one of them is this: that they fail to make it obvious to her that she's not a brain in a vat.

A causal account of how my justification to believe that I'm not a brain in a vat depends upon experience enables us to respect two ideas: that this justification *doesn't* evidentially depend upon experience, but that it *does* positively depend on experience. The fact that whatever is making me have the experiences I do also causes it to seem obvious that I'm not a brain in a vat hardly seems like *evidence* that I'm not: this surely doesn't make it more *likely* from my perspective that I'm not a brain in a vat! But it does articulate the way in which that obviousness positively depends upon my perceptual experience: for experience to give me the justification it does, it needs to be obvious that I'm not a brain in a vat, and so whatever is responsible for my having the experiences I do also makes this happen.

Clearly fleshing out this view will take some work. But let's imagine that this work has been carried out. Now I want to defend the idea that *if* something like this is right, we should think of our justification to believe we're not brains in vats as a priori.

First, the kind of dependence exhibited here isn't evidential, and hence doesn't inferentially depend upon any particular experience or experiences. You don't have justification to believe you're not a brain in a vat because you have some a posteriori evidence that you're not. Moreover, it isn't obvious to you that you're not a brain in a vat because you've had some perceptual experience *as of* not being a brain in a vat – your experiences don't *directly* justify you in believing you're not. So this justification isn't a posteriori in the way that the immediate judgments of perception are, and it's not a posteriori in the way that inferential beliefs based on perceptual justification are.

Second, this justification is something that we get just by having the kind of perceptual systems we do, provided those systems are up and running properly. If the healthy operation of your perceptual systems causes it to be obvious that you're not a bodiless brain in a vat, then there's no particular *course* of experience that's required for you to have this justification. There's nothing in particular that you need to learn and no particular perceptual abilities you need to acquire in order to have justification to believe you're not a brain in a vat. So long as things are working as they should with your perceptual faculties, you'll have it. While your having it depends upon your having the perceptual apparatus you do, and its operating the way that it should, it doesn't depend (positively, at least) upon what experiences you actually have.

So on this causal account, your justification to believe you're not a brain in a vat is neither immediately nor inferentially justified by any experiences, and its existence doesn't depend upon your having some particular course of experience or other (though of course you can lose it if you have *certain* courses of experience, such as if you were to

learn of the existence of mad scientists intent on envatting innocent victims). To my mind, that makes it sufficiently independent from experience to count as a priori. But I realize others will disagree.

## **8. A Priority and Necessity**

Friends of the a priori have suggested that the root of a priori justification is “intuition”, “intellectual seeming”, “rational insight”, or something along those lines. I’ve sketched an account of your justification to believe you’re not a brain in a vat that identifies its source in the fact that it’s obvious to you that this is so. I’m not sure whether to say that this is the same as your having an intuition or an insight or an intellectual seeming that it’s so. I see no reason not to; I wouldn’t be unhappy describing the obviousness of my not being a brain in a vat as involving an intuition or an intellectual seeming or a rational insight. However, many friends of the a priori would. Despite the difficulty of describing the mental episodes each of these terms pick out, many friends of the a priori seem to agree: however we characterize intuition (or whatever), it involves the appearance of the *necessity* of what’s intuited. Here, for instance, is George Bealer describing what he means by “rational intuition”:

In our context when we speak of intuitions, we mean “rational intuitions.” This is distinguished from what physicists call “physical intuition.” We have a physical intuition that, when a house is undermined, it will fall. This does not count as a

rational intuition, for it does not present itself as necessary: it does not seem that a house undermined *must* fall; plainly, it is *possible* for a house undermined to remain in its original position or, indeed, to rise up. By contrast, when we have a rational intuition, say, that if P then not not P, this presents itself as necessary: it seems that things could not be otherwise; it must be that if P then not not P.<sup>22</sup>

Ernest Sosa expresses a similar thought about intellectual seeming, which is what gives us a priori justification:

...the objects of *intellectual* seeming [...] present themselves as necessary.<sup>23</sup>

Lawrence BonJour concurs:

[A] priori justification occurs when the mind directly or intuitively discerns or grasps or apprehends a necessary fact about the structure of reality.<sup>24</sup>

[A priori] reasons result from direct or immediate insight into the truth, indeed the necessary truth, of the relevant claim.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Bealer (2000, 3). Bealer cautions in a footnote this might “need to be adjusted” if there are rational intuitions associated with the kind of contingent a priori knowledge Kripke suggests we have.

<sup>23</sup> Sosa (1996, 154).

<sup>24</sup> BonJour (1992, 90). BonJour could mean here that the mind intuitively discerns or grasps or apprehends a fact about reality, which *is* necessary, or that the mind intuitively discerns or grasps or apprehends a fact about reality *as being* a necessary fact about reality. Given his next remark, the second reading seems more appropriate.

Plantinga:

[The phenomenology of *a priori* warrant] consists, first (I suggest), in your finding yourself utterly convinced that the proposition in question is *true*. It consists second, however, in finding yourself utterly convinced that this proposition is not only true, but *could not have been false*. [...] To see that a proposition *p* is true—in the way in which we see that *a priori* truths are true—is to apprehend not only that things *are* a certain way but that they *must* be that way.<sup>26</sup>

The consensus among these writers is that the kinds of mental episodes that give us a priori justification involve something's appearing to be *necessary*. Though it is obvious that I am not a brain in a vat, it is not obvious that it is necessary that I am not a brain in a vat. Quite the contrary! It's obvious that I'm not, but it's also pretty obvious that it's metaphysically possible that I could have been.

With this consensus in mind, here is an objection to the account I've sketched.

First, a rough summary of the consensus view:

*Appearance of Necessity*. Rational intuitions are always intuitions as of something's being necessary.

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<sup>25</sup> Bonjour (2004, 99).

<sup>26</sup> Plantinga (1993, 105).

Second, a presupposition:

*Intuitions The Only Way.* A priori justification comes only from rational intuitions.

Taken together, these premises entail that the fact that it's obvious that I'm not a brain in a vat doesn't give me a priori justification to believe that I'm not. For by Appearance of Necessity, that state can't be a rational intuition. And thus by *Intuitions The Only Way*, it doesn't give me a priori justification.

Search the literature high and low: you won't find an argument for either premise. I am somewhat baffled as to why they're both apparently so widely and casually accepted, since they seem to make very wrong predictions, as we'll see here.

The first thing I'd like to note, though, is that I'm perfectly happy to allow *either* premise to be true – just not both. It does seem that there is a special class of intuitions that involve the sensed necessity of some truth; if we want to call these rational intuitions, so be it. But then I see no reason to think that *Intuitions are The Only Way*. Alternatively, we might want to call all those states that give us a priori justification rational intuitions. But then I see no reason to think that they always involve an *Appearance of Necessity*.

Let's assume that *Intuitions are The Only Way*. Friends of the a priori should, I think, allow that I have a priori justification to believe what Bealer says:

(\*) It is possible for a house undermined to remain in its original position or, indeed, to rise up.

It's hard to see how I could have a posteriori justification to believe (\*); my perceptual experience seems incapable of furnishing me with any evidence whatsoever for (\*). Rather, when I consider (\*), having imaginatively suspended the actual laws of nature, I get the immediate and strong sense that it is true. I'm inclined to count this as an intuition, but it's clearly not an intuition as of necessity. I don't have anything like the sense that this *couldn't have not been possible*. All I get, when I consider (\*), is swift and mighty "yes – true".<sup>27</sup> So given Appearance of Necessity, I don't have a rational intuition that this proposition is true; given Intuitions The Only Way, my immediate and strong sense that (\*) is true doesn't give me a priori justification to believe it.

Or consider our intuitive reaction to one of the myriad thought experiments frequently mustered as evidence for or against philosophical claims. Although the barn Henry's currently looking at is real, unbeknownst to him it's surrounded by visually indiscernible fakes – does Henry know that he's looking at a real barn?<sup>28</sup> Many have said no; i.e., to many, (\*\*) seems true:

(\*\*) If unbeknownst to someone he were surrounded by fake barns, he wouldn't know that the real barn he's looking at is real.

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<sup>27</sup> This is so even though I accept S5, and hence that if (\*) is possible, it's necessarily possible. For all that, the only *intuition* I seem to have is that it's possible. I recognize my theoretical commitment to its being necessarily possible, but that's not an accurate description of how things *seem to me* when I consider (\*).

<sup>28</sup> Cite Goldman.

Considering (\*\*), it seems true to me, too; I take it that this gives me at least some prima facie justification to believe it. I can't see what sort of a posteriori evidence I could have for (\*\*); to the extent that I have justification for it, it seems a priori.<sup>29</sup> Does (\*\*) seem to me to be necessary? Now I'm not entirely sure how to answer this question, because I'm not sure of the correct way to say that a particular counterfactual is necessarily true. If you can do so just by embedding it within the scope of "necessarily", then clearly (\*\*) *doesn't* seem necessarily true to me, for *this* seems outright false:

(\*\*\*) Necessarily, if, unbeknownst to someone, he were surrounded by fake barns, he wouldn't know that the real barn he's looking at is real.

Not so if the nearest possibility in which he's surrounded by fake barns is one in which he's accompanied by a traveling companion who knows which barn is real! So on the most straightforward way of understanding what it would be for (\*\*) to appear necessary, it's fairly clear that it doesn't. And if my sense that (\*\*) is true is not a sense that it's necessarily true, then by Appearance of Necessity, it's not a rational intuition; hence, by Intuitions The Only Way, it doesn't give me a priori justification to believe (\*\*).

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<sup>29</sup> Williamson (2008) suggests that this is not so. Ichikawa and Jarvis (forthcoming) offer a spirited response to Williamson's argument. Key to Williamson's argument is that counterfactuals like (\*\*) are contingent, and hence at best knowable a posteriori. Ichikawa and Jarvis argue that this is not so. Thus, both accept the link between a posteriority and necessity.

On the face of it, then, assuming Appearance of Necessity and Intuitions The Only Way leads us to deny that two pieces of putative a priori justification are not, in fact, a priori. Of course there might be ways of patching up the descriptions of both cases so that they don't have this result. But why bother doing so? The only motivation I can see is that there might be some clear or compelling reason for holding on to both Appearance of Necessity and Intuitions The Only Way. But as I said, I haven't been able to find any arguments for doing so. Widespread as their acceptance is, I can't give much credence to them when they seem to deliver bad verdicts about two pretty straightforward examples of a priori justification. Hence I can't give much credence to an argument from them to the conclusion that its seeming obvious that I'm not a bodiless brain in a vat doesn't give me a priori justification to believe that I'm not.

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