

Review of: "Why naturalists must give up deduction, or return to Hume"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

A general note:

Hesperus and Phosphorus in the examples should be in quotes ("Hesperus" and "Phosphorus") because the author is referring to the words, not the celestial bodies.

That said—this is a highly technical paper, and it will be hard to follow for those who are not already familiar with the debate. If that is the intended audience, it is probably fine as is. But if the author wants anyone outside the handful of philosophers on the planet familiar with this particular nuanced debate to read and understand this paper, at least one thing is needed: An explanation of why naturalists reject the possibility of a priori knowledge.

Now, the author mentions a few naturalists who have said that they do—Dennett and Devitt I believe are two. And they say things like "we are told over and over that naturalists do this." But it is entirely unclear to me why naturalists (must?) do this. Granted, empiricists would have to do this—just by definition—but are all naturalists empiricists? I don't think so. I consider myself to be a naturalist, but I don't think I reject the possibility of a prior truths.

Without this explanation, one wonders: why is the author "picking on" naturalists? Wouldn't this be a problem for anyone who rejects a priori knowledge (given that everyone uses deduction)? Are naturalists the only ones that reject a priori knowledge? It seems that the paper should just be framed as "anyone who rejects a priori knowledge but uses detection has a problem, and the only way to solve it is to be a Humean about deduction." The problem is not specific to naturalists.

What's more, the solution to this problem proposed by non-naturalists would be equally problematic. Non naturalists believe in the non-natural—the supernatural. So, if there is this divide between the naturalists and the supernaturalists on this issue, it would be because the naturalists say "there is nothing supernatural to provide us with a priori knowledge, so I don't believe it exists" and the super-naturalist say "I believe there is something supernatural to provide us with a priori knowledge, so I do believe it exists and the supernatural is where it comes from." Ok, the problem then is "it comes from the supernatural" is not really an adequate explanation for a priori knowledge. As Plato pointed out long ago, to say "God did it" is just to admit that you don't really have an explanation for the thing you are trying to explain. It's just equivalent to saying "It's magic." It is the "God of the gaps" move, the "mystery therefore magic" fallacy.

Let me put it this way: If the author is right, then anyone who uses deduction (which is everyone) needs to believe in a priori knowledge—knowledge gained without the aid of sense experience. If that's true, a very interesting question arises:

where does a priori knowledge come from? If it is not acquired via the senses, then where does it come from? That is an interesting question. But the supernaturalist can't say "this is a problem for the naturalist, but not for me, because I have an answer: a priori knowledge comes from the supernatural" because "X comes from the supernatural" is (and always has been) an unsatisfactory answer to any such question.

And if the supernaturalist can say "Well, I don't think the supernatural accounts for a priori knowledge; I just believe that a priori knowledge exists, so I am not being inconsistent when I do deduction"... Well, ok... but then why can't the naturalist just say the same thing? If the supernatural is not what brings about a priori knowledge, then why are all naturalists (supposedly) opposed to its existence? Why can't the naturalist suggest that a priori knowledge exists without giving an adequate explanation of where it comes from (given that the supernaturalist does exactly this)?

To put my overall point simply: I think the paper unjustifiably picks on naturalists. It takes the fact that naturalists reject a priori knowledge as a given, but it's not clear (at least to those unfamiliar with this debate) why naturalists reject a priori knowledge, and why supernaturalists don't... and why, given that supernatural explanations of a priori knowledge would be unsatisfactory, the problem the author identifies wouldn't really be a problem for everyone.

One last thing—and I'm not sure what to make of this, but it is something the paper brought to mind: If all naturalists reject a priori knowledge—is this an analytic truth or a synthetic one? Is it just true by definition that naturalists reject a priori knowledge? If so, does the author claim to know, a priori, that naturalists reject a priori knowledge? If so, is the author perhaps begging the question in some way against them (since the naturalist would deny that such a thing can be known a priori)? If it is not true by definition that naturalists reject a priori truths—then, at best, it just happens to be a fact that all naturalists fall into the camp of those who reject a priori truths. It is a contingent empirical fact. (Again, I think I am an example of a naturalists who is fine with a priori knowledge, so this would be false—but let us set that aside.) If that is contingency true, then naturalists need not reject a priori truths, and the problem the author identifies is not necessarily a problem for all naturalists.