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BONJOUR'S ARGUMENTS AGAINST SKEPTICISM
ABOUT THE *A PRIORI*

ABSTRACT. I reconstruct and critique two arguments Laurence Bonjour has recently offered against skepticism about the *a priori*. While the arguments may provide anti-skeptical, internalist foundationalists with reason to accept the *a priori*, I show that neither argument provides sufficient reason for believing the more general conclusion that there is no rational alternative to accepting the *a priori*.

Laurence Bonjour (1998) has recently developed and defended a moderate rationalist account of *a priori* justification.¹ An essential component of Bonjour's defense is a pair of arguments that purport to demonstrate the necessity of believing in the *a priori*. In what follows I reconstruct each of the arguments and make explicit the key assumptions that lie behind them. I then critically examine the arguments and show that neither of them succeeds in adequately supporting its conclusion. I conclude the essay by considering a dilemma Bonjour has formulated for any attempt to argue either in favor of or against the possibility of *a priori* justification.

I.

Bonjour's (1998, p. 4) first argument against skepticism about the *a priori* appears in the following passage:

For present purposes, I shall suppose that there are certain "foundational" beliefs that are fully justified by appeal to direct experience or sensory observation alone... The obvious and fundamental epistemological question then becomes whether it is possible to infer, in a way that brings with it epistemic justification, from these foundational beliefs to beliefs whose content goes beyond direct experience or observation: beliefs about the past, the future, and the unobserved aspects of the present; beliefs

JAMES BEEBE

that are general in their content; or beliefs that have to do with kinds of things that are not directly observable.

If the answer to this question is “no,” then the upshot is a quite deep form of skepticism (exactly how deep will depend on one’s account of the foundational beliefs—perhaps even solipsism of the present moment). But if the answer is “yes,” then such inferences must seemingly rely on either premises or principles of inference that are at least partially justified *a priori*. For if the conclusions of the inferences genuinely go beyond the content of direct experience, then it is impossible that those inferences could be entirely justified by appeal to that same experience. In this way, *a priori* justification may be seen to be essential if extremely severe forms of skepticism are to be avoided.

BonJour’s argument, a constructive dilemma, can be reconstructed as follows:

- (1.1) Assume: There are certain “foundational” beliefs that are fully justified by appeal to direct experience or sensory observation alone.
- (1.2) It is either possible or impossible to infer, in a way that brings with it epistemic justification, from these foundational beliefs to beliefs whose content goes beyond direct experience or observation.
- (1.3) If such justified inferences are not possible, a deep form of skepticism results.
- (1.4) If such justified inferences are possible, the inferences could not be justified entirely by appeal to the content of direct experience.
- (1.5) If an inference cannot be justified entirely by appeal to the content of direct experience, the justification for the inference must be at least partially *a priori*.
- (1.6) Therefore, either inferences from foundational beliefs to beliefs whose content goes beyond direct experience are justifiable at least partially *a priori* or a deep form of skepticism results.

The crucial premises in this argument are (1.4) and (1.5).

The version of (1.4) that appears in the passage above is weaker than necessary and almost certainly does not reflect

BONJOUR'S ARGUMENTS AGAINST SKEPTICISM

BonJour's full intentions. BonJour's original formulation refers to the possibility of inferences that go beyond the content of direct experience being entirely justified by appeal "to that same experience." BonJour's other remarks, however, suggest that he has something significantly stronger in mind. In the passage above we see that BonJour intends "beliefs whose content goes beyond direct experience" to include "beliefs about the past, the future, and the unobserved aspects of the present; beliefs that are general in their content; or beliefs that have to do with kinds of things that are not directly observable." In other words, BonJour is primarily thinking about inferences to beliefs whose content goes beyond the content of *any* direct experience.²

Premise (1.4) is based upon something like the following assumption about the justificatory limitations of direct experience:

- (DE1) No inference to a conclusion whose content goes beyond the content of direct experience can be justified solely by appealing to the content of direct experience.

(I follow BonJour in treating inferences as being justifiable in a sense that is analogous to the justifiability of beliefs.) On the basis of this assumption, premises (1.1), (1.2) and (1.4) validly yield:

- (1.5') If an inference cannot be justified entirely by the content of direct experience, at least part of the justification for the inference must come from some source other than direct experience.

(1.5) and (1.5') are not equivalent because there are *a posteriori* sources of justification other than direct experience. Testimony and memory, for example, can confer *a posteriori* justification on beliefs without themselves being forms of direct experience. And it might be possible for an inference to a conclusion whose content goes beyond direct experience to be justified by appeal to a principle of inference that was itself justified by direct experience. In such a case, the inference could be

JAMES BEEBE

indirectly but entirely justified *a posteriori* without being justified directly by experience.³ The foregoing reflections suggest both that BonJour's inference to subconclusion (1.5) is invalid and that (1.5) is false. If correct, they would show that BonJour's first argument for the importance of the *a priori* fails in at least two ways.

BonJour might respond to these charges by spelling out further the convictions behind (DE1). Of the three alternative sources of *a posteriori* justification discussed in the previous paragraph, BonJour might reply that if these sources of justification are able to provide justification that goes beyond the justification that can be provided by direct experience, there will need to be at least some *a priori* component to them. If, for example, memory is a merely preservative faculty that (under ideal conditions) sustains both the content and the justificatory status of previously justified beliefs, we can ask about how the previously justified beliefs came upon their positive epistemic status. If they were originally justified entirely by direct experience, then BonJour would likely maintain that such beliefs can neither justify any belief whose content goes beyond direct experience nor justify any inference to a conclusion whose content goes beyond direct experience. Only if the remembered beliefs were justified at least partially *a priori* do I think would BonJour be inclined to grant that they could – without further justificatory resources – justify inferences to conclusions whose content went beyond direct experience.

BonJour might be inclined to offer similar accounts for the other alternative sources of *a posteriori* justification mentioned above. For example, if testimonial beliefs are justified entirely by direct experience (a suggestion I expect BonJour would reject), he might claim that such beliefs can neither justify any belief whose content goes beyond direct experience nor justify any inference to a conclusion whose content went beyond direct experience. If, however, testimonial beliefs are justified at least partially *a priori*, BonJour might allow that they could justify inferences to conclusions whose content went beyond direct experience. Finally, given what BonJour

BONJOUR'S ARGUMENTS AGAINST SKEPTICISM

(1998, ch. 7) says about the problem of induction, I fully expect he would reject the possibility that any principle of ampliative inference could be justified entirely by direct experience.

These reflections suggest that (DE1) – while something BonJour would surely think is correct – is not sufficiently strong to represent his considered position about the justificatory limitations of direct experience. The following, stronger principle may better represent BonJour's position:

- (DE2) No inference to a conclusion whose content goes beyond the content of direct experience can be justified entirely by appealing to the content of direct experience or to any other source whose justification ultimately depends entirely upon direct experience.

Principle (DE2) suggests that premise (1.4) should be strengthened to read:

- (1.4') If such justified inferences are possible, the inferences could not be justified entirely by appeal to the content of direct experience or by any other source whose justification ultimately depends entirely upon direct experience.

(DE2), in conjunction with (1.1), (1.2) and (1.4'), yield the following lemma:

- (1.5'') If an inference cannot be justified entirely by the content of direct experience or by any other source whose justification ultimately depends entirely upon direct experience, the justification for the inference must be at least partially *a priori*.

From (1.2), (1.3), (1.4') and (1.5''), we can infer (1.6), the desired conclusion. Thus, on the assumption that (DE2) is true, BonJour's argument appears to go through.

Notice that principles (DE1) and (DE2) leave open the following, interesting possibility: That an inference to a

conclusion whose content did *not* go beyond the content of direct experience might be justified entirely by direct experience. Consider the following argument:

- (2.1) Object a_1 is F .
- (2.2) Object a_2 is F .
- (2.3) Object a_3 is F .
- (2.4) Therefore, objects a_1 through a_3 are F .

Suppose that each of the premises of this argument is justified by appeal to the content of some direct experience. Since the content of (2.4) is simply the conjunction of the contents of (2.1), (2.2) and (2.3) and each of the premises is justified by direct experience, is it possible for the inference from (2.1), (2.2) and (2.3) to (2.4) to be justified entirely by direct experience?⁴ Bonjour's answer would surely be "No." He appears to believe that seeing that a set of premises supports a conclusion (either inductively or deductively) *always* involves the exercise of pure reason. But it will be important in what follows to note that this response is not mandated by principles (DE1) and (DE2).⁵

II.

Now that we have more fully explicated Bonjour's stance vis-à-vis the justificatory power and limitations of direct experience, we need to critically examine the merits of the assumptions that lie behind his first argument. Principles (DE1) and (DE2) maintain that no direct experience is able to justify (even indirectly) an observation-transcendent inference. Millian inductivists and Quinean confirmational holists would surely object to this claim. What reason is there to believe it is true? Bonjour's emphasis on the importance of solving the problem of induction in his writings on the *a priori* suggests the following indirect line of argument for this claim:

- (3.1) Assume: It is false that no direct experience is able to justify an observation-transcendent inference.
- (3.2) If it is false that no direct experience is able to justify an observation-transcendent inference, then

BONJOUR'S ARGUMENTS AGAINST SKEPTICISM

- at least some observation-transcendent inferences are justifiable entirely *a posteriori*.
- (3.3) Observation-transcendent inferences are inductive inferences.
 - (3.4) If it is false that no direct experience is able to justify an observation-transcendent inference, then at least some inductive inferences are justifiable entirely *a posteriori*.
 - (3.5) If some inductive inferences are justifiable entirely *a posteriori*, then the problem of induction (i.e., the problem of showing how inductive inferences can be justified) can be given a purely *a posteriori* solution.
 - (3.6) But no purely *a posteriori* solution to the problem of induction has ever been given, and most empiricists believe the problem of induction is unsolvable.
 - (3.7) Therefore, it is true that no direct experience is able to justify an observation-transcendent inference.

Clearly, the argument from (3.1) to (3.7) is less than fully conclusive. It is possible for premises (3.1) through (3.6) to be true and for the conclusion to be false. If (3.6) were replaced with the stronger claim that no purely *a posteriori* solution to the problem of induction is possible, the argument would be valid. But the only available justification for this stronger claim would seem to be something like (DE1) or (DE2), whose very truth is at issue.

Even if we were to grant that the argument from (3.1) to (3.7) provides modest (but less than conclusive) support for its conclusion, BonJour would need to address the possibility that for all this argument has shown, the reason the contents of direct experiences are unable to justify observation-transcendent inferences is that they are unable to justify anything. (DE1) and (DE2) merely declare that direct experience is unable to justify certain inferences. But nothing follows from these assumptions about there actually being something that can perform the

required justificatory work. In short, BonJour needs to provide support for (1.1), the initial assumption of his argument. On a variety of epistemological views, appeals to the contents of perceptual experience cannot themselves justify any perceptual belief. According to various forms of skepticism, for example, the contents of perceptual experience are unable to justify any of our perceptual beliefs about the external world. And according to reliabilism, it is the reliability of the cognitive processes that produce observational beliefs and inferences – rather than the contents of the experiences that may initiate such processes – that determines epistemic justification. From both a skeptical and a reliabilist perspective, then, (DE1) and (DE2) are trivially true because (1.1) is false. BonJour needs to rule out these and other possible reasons why the contents of direct experiences may be unable to justify observational beliefs.

BonJour does not, however, provide any reason to believe (1.1) in the passage quoted above. In more recent work where BonJour (1999; 2003) explicitly addresses the question of how observational beliefs might be justified by appealing to the contents of perceptual experiences, BonJour (1999, p. 229; cf. 2003, pp. 60–76) attempts to “outline” a “tenable version of a traditional foundationalist account of empirical justification” that avoids the Sellarsian dilemma. But it is far from clear that any part of this “outline” should be construed as a positive argument for (1.1).

Even if BonJour could succeed in supporting all of the key assumptions behind his first argument against skepticism about the *a priori*, the argument would still not show that it is necessary to believe in the *a priori*. The argument’s disjunctive conclusion states that either inferences from foundational beliefs to observation-transcendent beliefs are justifiable at least partially *a priori* or else a deep form of skepticism is true. In order to show there is no rational alternative to believing in *a priori* justification, BonJour would need to rule out the possibility of skepticism. The “deep form of skepticism” BonJour has in mind in (1.3) and (1.6) is simply inductive skepticism. It is a serious form of skepticism because of our widespread

BONJOUR'S ARGUMENTS AGAINST SKEPTICISM

dependence upon inductive inference. Of course, Bonjour (1998, ch. 7) has an argument against inductive skepticism. According to his recently proposed solution to the problem of induction, if relevant observational conditions have been varied to a substantial degree, we can know *a priori* that standard inductive premises such as:

$$(4.1) \quad m/n \text{ of observed } As \text{ are } Bs$$

constitute good reasons for believing standard inductive conclusions such as:

$$(4.2) \quad m/n \text{ } As \text{ are } Bs.$$

BonJour (1998, pp. 207–208) claims we can know *a priori* there is likely to be some non-chance explanation for a standard inductive premise and that “an objective regularity of a sort that would make the conclusion of a standard inductive argument true provides the best *explanation* for the truth of the premise of such an argument.”⁶

Whatever the merits of Bonjour’s solution to the problem of induction⁷, it cannot be used in the present context to rule out the skeptical disjunct of (1.6) without begging the question. It is the very possibility of *a priori* justification that is in question and that Bonjour’s argument from (1.1) to (1.6) is intended to establish. Therefore, any component of the overall argument that explicitly relies upon our ability to be *a priori* justified in believing certain propositions will be illegitimate. Moreover, since all of Bonjour’s (1985, §8.4; 1999; 2003) published responses to skepticism appeal to *a priori* considerations, Bonjour appears to have no philosophical resources available for eliminating the second disjunct of (1.6) in a way that is not question-begging in the present context.⁸ Consequently, Bonjour seems unable to provide a successful argument for the necessity of believing in the possibility of *a priori* justification.

BonJour’s first argument begins with an assumption that is contrary both to external world skepticism and to various forms of epistemic externalism such as reliabilism. It then

JAMES BEEBE

relies upon the assumption that both inductive skepticism and radical empiricism are false in order to reach the desired conclusion. Since every argument must assume something, what is wrong with the fact that BonJour assumes some things in order to prove other things? Compare the following claims:

- (5.1) There is no rational alternative to believing in the possibility of *a priori* justification for anyone who believes (a) that epistemic externalism is false, (b) that the correct form of epistemic internalism is a traditional version of foundationalism, (c) that basic perceptual beliefs can be justified by appealing to the contents of perceptual experiences, (d) that external world skepticism is false, (e) that inductive skepticism is false, and (f) that all forms of radical empiricism are false.
- (5.2) There is no rational alternative to believing in the possibility of *a priori* justification.

Clearly, to prove the former is not to prove the latter. While I think a charitable interpretation of BonJour's first argument can allow that it provides good reason for believing (5.1), the argument falls far short of supporting (5.2). Yet BonJour's clear intention is to prove (5.2) rather than (5.1). As a result, his argument fails to accomplish its intended purpose.

III.

Let's turn our attention now to BonJour's second argument against skepticism about the *a priori* and see if it fares any better than the first. The second argument is found in the following passage:

Could an argument of any sort be entirely justified on empirical grounds? It seems clear on reflection that the answer to this question is "no." Any purely empirical ingredient can, after all, always be formulated as an additional empirical premise. When all such premises have been explicitly formulated, either the intended conclusion will be explicitly included

BONJOUR'S ARGUMENTS AGAINST SKEPTICISM

among them or it will not. In the former case, no argument or inference is necessary, while in the latter case, the needed inference clearly goes beyond what can be derived entirely from experience. Thus we see that the repudiation of all *a priori* justification is apparently tantamount to the repudiation of argument or reasoning generally, thus amounting in effect to intellectual suicide. (BonJour 1998, p. 5)

The explicit premises of BonJour's argument include the following:

- (6.1) Any purely empirical ingredient of the justification for an argument can always be formulated as an additional premise.
- (6.2) If all the purely empirical ingredients of the justification for an argument have been explicitly formulated as premises, either the intended conclusion will be explicitly included among the premises or it will not.
- (6.3) If the conclusion is included among the premises, no argument or inference is necessary.
- (6.4) If the conclusion is not included among the premises, the needed inference clearly goes beyond what can be derived entirely from experience.

These premises support the following claim, made by BonJour at the beginning of the quoted passage above:

- (6.5) It is not possible for an argument to be entirely justified on empirical grounds.

BonJour then concludes:

- (6.6) The repudiation of all *a priori* justification is apparently tantamount to the repudiation of argument or reasoning generally, thus amounting in effect to intellectual suicide.

The crucial points of the argument are premise (6.1) and the inference to subconclusion (6.5).

According to the version of "old-fashioned foundationalism" recently defended by BonJour (1999; 2001; 2003), the empirical ingredients of justification are either perceptual beliefs or the contents of perceptual experiences that can be

described by perceptual beliefs. The contents of perceptual beliefs contribute to the justification of other beliefs by serving as premises from which those further beliefs can be inferred. Although BonJour (1999, pp. 234–235) takes the contents of perceptual experiences to be non-conceptual, he maintains they can constitute “a kind of reason or basis” for perceptual beliefs that describe them. However, because the contents of experiences are non-conceptual and outrun the propositional contents of any perceptual beliefs based upon them, it does not seem possible for experiential contents to stand in a relation to perceptual beliefs that is analogous to the relations that obtain between premises and conclusions. Thus, on BonJour’s view, it does not seem possible for every purely empirical ingredient of justification to be formulated as a premise in some justificatory argument. Premise (6.1), however, does not make the unrestricted claim that every component of every sort of empirical justification can be formulated as a premise in a justificatory argument. Instead, it claims that the empirical ingredients of the justification of *arguments* can always be formulated as premises.⁹

Even if it were true that any purely empirical ingredient of the justification for an argument could be formulated as a premise, it is not clear why the same thing would not be true of any purely *a priori* ingredient of the justification of an argument. In other words, if the above argument were sound, it seems that the following anti-rationalist argument might be sound as well:

- (7.1) Any purely *a priori* ingredient of the justification for an argument can always be formulated as an additional premise.
- (7.2) If all the purely *a priori* ingredients of the justification for an argument have been explicitly formulated as premises, either the intended conclusion will be explicitly included among the premises or it will not.
- (7.3) If the conclusion is included among the premises, no argument or inference is necessary.

BONJOUR'S ARGUMENTS AGAINST SKEPTICISM

- (7.4) If the conclusion is not included among the premises, the needed inference clearly goes beyond what can be derived from the *a priori* alone.
- (7.5) Therefore, it is not possible for an argument to be justified entirely *a priori*.

Because the moderate rationalist – unlike the radical empiricist – acknowledges both *a priori* and *a posteriori* sources of justification, the following conclusion, analogous to (6.6) above, cannot be derived from this argument:

- (7.6) The repudiation of all empirical justification is tantamount to the repudiation of argument or reasoning generally, thus amounting in effect to intellectual suicide.

The argument from (7.1) to (7.5) would, however, undermine an important doctrine of BonJour's rationalism, viz., that some arguments can be justified entirely *a priori*. The argument also runs contrary to the following, central tenet of BonJour's position:

- (AP) Inferences to conclusions whose contents go beyond the contents of the premises must be justified at least partially *a priori*.

(AP) is a corollary to principles (DE1) and (DE2) and is an essential component of BonJour's arguments against radical empiricism. The falsity of (AP), however, is required for the above argument to be sound. Although BonJour would surely object to this argument, it is not evident from his exposition of moderate rationalism why his position would not be susceptible to it.¹⁰

Even if it were true that any purely empirical ingredient (but not any *a priori* ingredient) of the justification for an argument could be formulated as a premise, it is not clear that any substantive conclusion about the *a priori* would follow from this fact. Premises (6.1) through (6.4) imply the following subconclusion, from which (6.5) can be seen as being implicitly derived:

JAMES BEEBE

- (6.7) For any argument the purely empirical ingredients of the justification of which have been explicitly formulated as premises, either (a) no argument or inference will be necessary (because the conclusion will be explicitly included among the premises) or (b) the inference goes beyond what can be derived entirely from experience.

Our previous discussion of BonJour's first argument and principle (DE2) suggests that option (b) should be strengthened to read:

- (b) The conclusion will not be explicitly included among the premises and the inference will go beyond what can be derived entirely from experience (or from any other source whose justification ultimately depends entirely upon experience).

We need to ask what it is about options (a) and (b) that is supposed to show that an argument cannot be justified entirely *a posteriori*.

Consider option (a) first. Showing that a particular inference is not necessary is not the same thing as showing that the inference – were it to be made – could not be justified entirely *a posteriori*. Suppose someone were to infer the proposition that p from the proposition that p . If one already believes that p , it is certainly not necessary to draw such an inference – nor is making such an inference a terribly interesting thing to do. It is, however, an inference that one can be justified in making. Is there any reason for thinking this inference cannot be justified entirely by direct experience? Of course, if the premise were justified by a direct experience, the conclusion might be justified by appealing to that same experience. But then one would no longer be thinking of the conclusion as standing in an inferential relation to the premise, and there would be no question of whether the inference itself is justified. However, if the transition from the proposition that p to the proposition that p were genuinely inferential, could the inference be justified entirely *a posteriori*?

BONJOUR'S ARGUMENTS AGAINST SKEPTICISM

Earlier we noted that BonJour's explicit statements about the justificatory limitations of direct experience are directed primarily toward the alleged inability of direct experience to justify inferences to conclusions whose content goes *beyond* that of direct experience. We also noted that principles such as (DE1) and (DE2) leave open the possibility that inferences to conclusions whose contents do *not* go beyond that of direct experience might be justified entirely *a posteriori*. For all BonJour has shown, then, an inference from p to p – while perhaps not necessary – might nevertheless be justified entirely by direct experience. However, in a discussion of the problem of induction BonJour (1998, p. 203) makes the following claim about rational inference:

Thus, as we saw in §1.1, a rationally justified transition from the premises to the conclusion of *any* argument, whether it be classified as deductive or as inductive or as falling under some further rubric, can ultimately only be made on an *a priori* basis.

Thus, BonJour believes:

- (DE3) Direct experience cannot entirely justify any inference, regardless of whether the content of the argument's conclusion goes beyond that of direct experience or not.

BonJour clearly thinks he has established the truth of (DE3) – or at least the truth of something that entails (DE3) – somewhere in §1.1. The arguments in §1.1 he alludes to, however, are just the two arguments against skepticism about the *a priori* that are the subject of the present article. A careful examination of those arguments reveals that nothing in either of them supports a claim as strong as (DE3). Indeed, the first argument – as we saw above – leaves open the possibility that (DE3) might be false, and the second argument appears to assume rather than to provide support for (DE3). Nor do we find any argument for (DE3) in the rest of BonJour's published writings.¹¹ Again, we find BonJour making crucial assumptions about the justificatory limitations of the *a posteriori* that he fails to support. Consequently, BonJour gives us no real reason

JAMES BEEBE

to believe that option (a) of (6.7) warrants the conclusion that no argument could be entirely justified on empirical grounds.

Consider now option (b). According to (b), if the conclusion of the argument in question is not explicitly formulated as one of the premises, then the inference will go beyond what can be derived entirely from experience. Clearly, this option can support the desired conclusion only if assumptions (DE1) and (DE2) are true. If we continue to grant that the supplementary argument from (3.1) to (3.7) offers modest support for (DE1) and (DE2), then we should perhaps grant that option (b) does not allow for inferences to be justified entirely *a posteriori*.

However, in order for (6.5) to follow from lemma (6.7) and for BonJour's claims about "intellectual suicide" to follow from (6.5), it needs to be the case that neither option (a) nor (b) allows for the possibility of an argument being justified entirely *a posteriori*. Even if the case for (b) were successful, we have seen there is no reason to believe that (a) accomplishes its task. Consequently, the inference from (6.1) through (6.4) to (6.5) does not appear to be valid. If the premises and assumptions of the argument do not provide sufficient warrant for (6.5), they also fail to support the claim in (6.6) that the "repudiation of all *a priori* justification is apparently tantamount to the repudiation of argument or reasoning generally, thus amounting in effect to intellectual suicide." Thus, BonJour's second argument fails to undermine skepticism about the *a priori*.

IV.

The following objection has been raised against my critique of BonJour's arguments for the necessity of believing in the *a priori*:

Your criticisms ignore the important role that inferential internalism plays in both of BonJour's arguments. Inferential internalism is the view that in order for an argument to be justified for a person, the justification for the argument must be possessed by or at least be available to that person. If

BONJOUR'S ARGUMENTS AGAINST SKEPTICISM

inferential internalism is granted, Bonjour's arguments appear to be unassailable. If, however, inferential internalism is rejected, none of the detailed criticisms you provide are necessary. Bonjour's arguments never get off the ground without this central assumption. If you want to argue against Bonjour, the issue of inferential internalism should occupy center stage in your critique.¹²

Bonjour is indeed committed to inferential internalism (cf. Bonjour 1998, p. 5, n. 3). Yet contrary to what the objection alleges, this thesis (i) does not play any role in the explicit statements of Bonjour's arguments, (ii) is not needed in order for the premises of those arguments to support their conclusions, and (iii) would not strengthen the arguments if it were added as an additional premise or assumption to either of them.

A brief inspection of premises (1.1) through (1.5) of the first argument and premises (6.1) through (6.4) of the second reveals that none of these premises is either logically equivalent to the thesis of inferential internalism or dependent upon the truth of inferential internalism. Premises (1.2) and (1.4) refer to the possibility of justified inferences but say nothing about whether the justification for those inferences should be understood from an inferential internalist perspective. Indeed, since an increasing number of epistemic externalists, including Louise Antony (2004) and Alvin Goldman (1999), seem willing to grant that observation-transcendent inferences may need to be justified at least partially *a priori*, there is reason to believe these premises are consistent with the denial of inferential internalism.

Above I granted above that the stated conclusion of Bonjour's first argument, (1.6), follows from its premises (properly understood). And since these premises neither include nor presuppose inferential internalism, that doctrine clearly is not needed in order to derive (1.6) from these premises. My critique of the argument centered on whether there were any non-question-begging reasons to believe (1.4) and (1.5) and whether Bonjour could eliminate the skeptical disjunct of (1.6). Premises (1.4) and (1.5) were seen to rest upon (DE2), and it was argued that Bonjour cannot rule out the possibility of skepticism. However, inferential internalism

can provide no reason to think that (DE2) is true because the former is both logically and evidentially independent of the latter. Moreover, inferential internalism gives us no reason to think that skepticism is false. The claim that the justification for an argument must be available to a subject does not imply that any subject ever actually possesses the requisite justification. Thus, inferential internalism is quite compatible with a thoroughgoing skepticism.

Not only is inferential internalism not required by BonJour's first argument, it is also not sufficient to warrant belief in the *a priori* – contrary to what the objection alleges. Inferential internalism requires only that the justification for an argument be available to a subject. It does not require that the justification in question be *a priori*. Thus, inferential internalism is neutral with respect to the choice between BonJour's moderate rationalism and a radical form of empiricism that claims all justification – including inferential justification – is *a posteriori*.

Similar considerations apply to the role of inferential internalism in BonJour's second argument. The crucial parts of this argument were seen to be premise (6.1) and the inferential transition to subconclusion (6.5). Inferential internalism, however, does not appear capable of providing support for the claim in (6.1) that empirical ingredients of the justification of arguments can always be formulated as additional premises. Indeed, (6.1) seems to be compatible with the denial of inferential internalism. According to reliabilism, for example, facts about the reliability of inferential cognitive processes determine the justification of inferences. There seems to be no reason why the relevant facts about reliability could not always be formulated as additional premises of the arguments in question. Thus, (6.1) does not seem to require the truth of inferential internalism. Inferential internalism also appears unable to warrant the questionable inference to (6.5). Consequently, the doctrine of inferential internalism seems to be both independent of the issues driving BonJour's arguments against skepticism about the *a priori* and unable to help those arguments overcome the objections raised against them above.

BONJOUR'S ARGUMENTS AGAINST SKEPTICISM

V.

Somewhat surprisingly, BonJour (1998, p. 99) formulates the following dilemma for any attempt to argue in favor of the possibility of *a priori* justification:

It is obvious at once that there can be no general *a priori* argument in favor of the rationalist view and against skepticism concerning the *a priori* that is not intrinsically question-begging. Nor does any straightforwardly empirical consideration appear to be relevant here: the truth or falsity of rationalism is obviously not a matter of direct observation; and any sort of inductive or explanatory inference from observational data would, as we have already seen, have to be justified *a priori* if it is to be justified at all, thereby rendering the argument again circular.

If every argument against skepticism about the *a priori* cannot fail to beg the question, how are we to understand the two arguments that have been the subject of this essay? If they rely upon *a priori* insights – as apparently they must, if they are to have any bearing upon the *a priori* – they beg the question against the *a priori* skeptic. And yet BonJour believes he can successfully argue against skepticism about the *a priori*.

BonJour takes the fact that radical empiricism finds itself in a similar dialectical situation to constitute a serious objection to that view. He writes,

One thing that is obvious at once is that radical empiricism is entirely impervious to any direct refutation. What, after all, is such an attempted refutation to appeal to? An appeal to *a priori* insight or argumentation would be obviously question-begging, while no appeal to direct experience seems to have any clear bearing on the possibility or impossibility of *a priori* justification. Thus the radical empiricist is in a relatively secure dialectical position, one from which he cannot be dislodged by any direct assault.

But this immunity to refutation does not of course constitute a positive reason for thinking that radical empiricism is correct. Moreover, it is purchased at a rather severe price, for it becomes equally difficult to see what positive argument there could be for radical empiricism: it is just as hard to see how the truth of such a view could be supported by direct experience as to see how it could be refuted by such experience; while to offer any sort of non-empirical argument would be obviously incompatible with the

JAMES BEEBE

radical empiricist's central claim. This problem parallels one already noted at the end of Chapter 2 for moderate empiricism: as was the case there, no account of the justification of the main radical empiricist thesis that is not in direct conflict with its truth seems to be possible. (BonJour 1998, p. 63)

If the putative fact that there can be no non-circular argument in favor of radical empiricism compromises the philosophical integrity of that view, why doesn't the fact that there can be no non-question-begging argument in favor of rationalism do the same for it? And why doesn't BonJour conclude that "no account of the justification of the main *rationalist* thesis that is not in direct conflict with its truth seems to be possible"? BonJour offers no answers to these pressing questions.

Since BonJour (1985; 1998; 1999; 2001; 2003) has not hesitated to offer *a priori* arguments for both the possibility and the existence of empirical justification, his rather quick dismissal of the possibility of empirical considerations having any bearing on the question of *a priori* justification is less than fully persuasive.¹³ Furthermore, if there is a way to resolve or to avoid the dilemma BonJour has formulated, the fact that BonJour does not provide such a resolution counts as a further problem facing his arguments. If, however, the dilemma cannot be resolved or avoided, then BonJour's arguments against skepticism about the *a priori* appear to be doomed to failure. In any case, BonJour's pessimism about there being any way for rationalists and empiricists to avoid the dialectical stalemate he describes threatens to undermine whatever persuasive force his arguments against skepticism about the *a priori* may have.

VI.

I have argued that BonJour's two main arguments for the necessity of believing in the *a priori* do not succeed. While the first argument may provide certain anti-skeptical, internalist foundationalists with reason to accept the *a priori*, it does not have the broader motivating force BonJour takes it to have.

BONJOUR'S ARGUMENTS AGAINST SKEPTICISM

And the second argument appears to be unable to provide anyone who did not already believe in the *a priori* with a reason for doing so. Thus, for all these arguments have shown, the question of whether there is any rational alternative to believing in the *a priori* appears to remain open.

NOTES

¹ According to Bonjour's (1998, pp. 15–16) conception of rationalism, "*a priori* justification occurs when the mind directly or intuitively sees or grasps or apprehends (or perhaps merely seems to itself to see or grasp or apprehend) a necessary fact about the nature or structure of reality." This type of justification, he claims, "is genuine *a priori* justification that is not limited in its scope to tautologies or matters of definition" (Bonjour 1998, xi).

² Albert Casullo (2000, p. 32) tries to exploit the weakness of Bonjour's original formulation of (1.4) by arguing that empiricists could construct the following argument against rationalism that is analogous to Bonjour's first argument:

Assume that some beliefs are directly justified by rational insight. Either some beliefs whose content goes beyond direct rational insight are justified or skepticism is true. The justification of beliefs whose content goes beyond direct rational insight requires principles of inference that are justified empirically:

For if the conclusions of the inferences genuinely go beyond the content of direct rational insight, then it is impossible that those inferences could be entirely justified by appeal to that same insight.

Hence, either principles of inference are justified *empirically* or skepticism is true.

Casullo (ibid.) admits, "No rationalist would take this argument seriously." But then, the suggestion goes, neither should any empiricist take Bonjour's first argument seriously. Casullo's *tu quoque*, however, makes too much of the fact that Bonjour's initial formulation of (1.4) mentions the impossibility of an inference from a premise justified by *a particular direct experience* to a conclusion whose content goes beyond direct experience being entirely justified by appeal to *that very same experience*. Bonjour does think this is impossible, but careful attention to the passage in which his argument appears reveals that Bonjour is most concerned with inferences to conclusions whose contents go beyond anything offered by any direct experience. Thus, Casullo's failure to appreciate Bonjour's broader position leads him to represent Bonjour's view as being weaker than it actually is.

³ Casullo (2000, p. 32) offers a similar objection to Bonjour's argument: "[Empiricists] can maintain that a belief directly justified by some experience *E*, in conjunction with a belief in a principle of inference directly justified by some other experience *E**, can indirectly justify a belief whose content goes beyond that of the directly justified beliefs."

⁴ Some of Bonjour (1985, p. 54) earlier remarks on the lottery paradox seem to allow for the possibility of inferences being justified purely *a posteriori*:

Since there are 100 tickets and only one winner, the probability of each such proposition is .99; and hence if I believe each of them, my individual beliefs will be adequately justified to satisfy the requirement for knowledge. And then, given only the seemingly reasonable assumptions, first, that if one has adequate justification for believing each of a set of propositions, one also has adequate justification for believing the conjunction of those propositions; and, second, that if one has adequate justification for believing a proposition, one also has adequate justification for believing any further proposition entailed by the first proposition, it follows that I am adequately justified in believing that no ticket will win, contradicting my other information.

If, as Bonjour assumes, the justification one has for each of a set of proposition provides sufficient justification for believing their conjunction and one's justification for believing the individual propositions is purely *a posteriori*, then it seems that the inference from these propositions to their conjunction will be justified entirely *a posteriori*. Evidence that Bonjour is not merely making this assumption for the sake of argument – i.e., merely in order to set up the lottery paradox – can be found in Bonjour's (1985, p. 55) remark that rejecting this assumption in an effort to escape the paradox would be "extremely implausible."

⁵ Cf. section III below for more discussion of this issue.

⁶ More specifically, Bonjour (1998, p. 208, 212) claims that because we can know the following two theses *a priori*, we are justified in believing standard inductive conclusions:

(I-1) In a situation in which a standard inductive premise obtains, it is highly likely that there is some explanation (other than mere coincidence or chance) for the convergence and constancy of the observed proportion (and the more likely, the larger the number of cases in question).

(I-2) So long as the possibility that observation itself affects the proportion of *As* that are *Bs* is excluded, the best explanation, that is, the most likely to be true, for the truth of a standard inductive premise is the straight inductive explanation, namely that the observed proportion m/n accurately reflects (within a reasonable degree of approximation) a corresponding objective regularity in the world (and this likelihood increases as

BONJOUR'S ARGUMENTS AGAINST SKEPTICISM

the number of observations and the variety of the collateral circumstances of observation increases).

⁷ See Beebe (forthcoming, (b)) for detailed discussion and criticism of Bonjour's solution to the problem of induction.

⁸ In some of his early work, Bonjour (1985, §8.4) argued that the *a priori* improbability of evil demon skepticism can be apprehended by rational insight. More recently, Bonjour (1999; 2001; 2003) has argued against skepticism about the external world by claiming we can be *a priori* justified in abductively inferring that our sensory experiences are caused by a realm of three-dimensional objects having roughly the shapes, spatial relations and causal properties that are reflected in our sensory experiences. Bonjour (2003, pp. 94–95) claims we can see that the “quasi-commonsensical hypothesis about the external world” is *a priori* more likely to be true than any skeptical hypotheses involving “Berkeley's God, Descartes's demon, or the computer that feeds electrical impulses to a brain-in-a-vat.” For a critique of Bonjour's approach to skepticism, see Beebe (forthcoming, (a)).

⁹ Given Bonjour's perspective on the justification of arguments, this may seem like a rather curious point to make. As we will see below, Bonjour does not believe that the justification of an argument ever has *any* empirical component. Describing what he means by the ‘justification of an argument,’ Bonjour (1998, p. 5) writes:

For any argument an issue that is closely analogous to the issue of epistemic justification for propositions can be raised: is there any reason for thinking that the conclusion of the argument either must be true or else is likely to be true *if* the premises are true? When such a reason exists, the argument in question may be said to be rationally cogent and the inference in question to be, in a somewhat modified sense, epistemically justified; where no such reason exists, the argument has no rational force and the inference is epistemically unjustified.

While a subject may have empirical justification for believing the premises of an argument, Bonjour (1998, p. 203) maintains that believing that the conclusion follows from the premises can only be justified *a priori*. (The justification of the conclusion of such an argument will, then, presumably have both *a priori* and empirical components.) If Bonjour doesn't think the actual justification of any argument ever has any empirical component, perhaps he is merely saying something like the following to his empiricist interlocutors: “Consider any argument you take to be entirely justified on empirical grounds. Then take all of the empirical ingredients you think provide justification for the argument and formulate them as premises. You will find that, having granted assumption (6.1), it will be impossible for you to show the resulting argument to be entirely justified on empirical grounds.”

JAMES BEEBE

¹⁰ BonJour's insistence that every empirical component of the justification of an argument can be formulated as an additional premise and the related claim that every *a priori* component can be as well are obviously reminiscent of the reasoning of Lewis Carroll's (1895/1995) Tortoise. Cf. Smiley (1995) for critical discussion of the dilemma raised by the Tortoise and Miscevic (1998) for a comparison of BonJour's reasoning to the Tortoise's.

¹¹ Contrary to what some commentators have suggested, BonJour's inferential internalism does not provide any support for this claim. Cf. section IV below for more discussion of this point.

¹² This objection was raised by Richard Fumerton and Sandy Goldberg and by an anonymous reviewer from *Philosophical Studies*.

¹³ Cf. Casullo's (2000; 2003) recent work on the *a priori* for suggestions on how rationalists might offer empirical support for their view.

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