

Metaphysics and A Priori Vindication

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Outline

Introductory

1. Two central metaphysical topics
2. A picture of modal space
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4. Knowledge of meaning and a priori access
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Introductory

- Is there good reason to think that there is some interesting kind of a priori access to metaphysical truths of the sort often at issue in philosophy?
- Focus on truths of these two kinds
 - It is metaphysically necessary that if something emits heat, it causes an increase in molecular motion in its immediate vicinity.
 - It lies in the nature of desire that one who desires to do something sees that thing as at least prima facie good.
- **MN-truth** [Metaphysical Necessity truth] = truth of the first kind
- **EN-truth** (Essence/Nature truth) = truth of the second kind
- Aim: Delineate and motivate a thesis of a priori access to MN- and EN-truths.

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Introductory: modesty of the project

- No attempt to defend the very possibility of a priori knowledge in general (against worries about naturalism, Quinean worries, etc.)
- "A priori access" must be understood modestly:
 - Claim is not that, for some MN- or EN-truth P, it is a *a priori knowable that P*.
 - The claim is that P appears as the consequent of some significant conditional, where *that conditional is knowable a priori*.
- To be a *significant* conditional:
 - The antecedent must be *in fact true*.
 - The antecedent must *not be identical* with the consequent or be a conjunction where the consequent is one of the conjuncts.

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Introductory: ambition of the project

- Not a cumulative case for thinking that most MN or EN truths are a priori accessible.
- A principled case for thinking that any MN- or EN-truth must be a priori accessible in this way.
- If correct, an interesting *requirement of a priori vindication* (vindicatability) can be imposed.
- While one might know some MN- or EN-truth in a thoroughly empirical way, if an MN- or EN-claim is true, then it must be in principle possible to access it using an a priori conditional of the relevant sort.

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1. Two central metaphysical topics

- 1.1 Metaphysical modality
- 1.2 Essences and essential truths

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1.1 Metaphysical modality

- Metaphysical, logical, and conceptual necessity: equivalent in *strength*.
- Different qualifiers indicate differences either in epistemic status or what explains the necessity in question.
- The relevant strength can be defined thus:
It is *strictly necessary* that $P =_{\text{def}}$
There is no literal and not-merely-epistemic sense in which it is possible for it to have been false that P.
- A strict necessity can be "possibly false" in a merely epistemic sense:
"That water is H_2O could be false" = Perhaps water is not H_2O
"That $2+2=4$ could be false" = Perhaps $2+2$ is not 4.

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1.2 Essences and essential truths

- Not every necessary property of something is part of its essence:
 - Socrates is necessarily such that $2+2=4$.
 - Socrates is necessarily human.
- Only the second reflects something about the nature of Socrates.
- "It lies in the nature of x that P" indicates that if x exists, P is true as *a result of the nature of x*.
- Essences have modal import: if it lies in the nature of x that P, then it's strictly necessary that if x exists, P.
- Arguably there is no way to distinguish essential from merely necessary properties on purely modal grounds.

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2. A picture of modal space

- 2.1 Possibility as the default
- 2.2 Two theses
- 2.3 The plausibility of this picture
- 2.4 Competing metaphysics of possibility

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2.1 Possibility as the default

- Main idea: (strict) possibility is the default status for any situation.
- A situation gets to be possible for free: it is only impossible if something about its nature *prevents* it from obtaining.
- Intuitively: a situation is possible unless something about its essence gets in its own way.
- If the thing that prevents the situation from obtaining is not part of the very nature of the situation, the block is contingent on that other thing—so not an absolute or strict impossibility.
- Significance of this: if it is not possible that P, its impossibility must be explainable by reference to something about its nature.
- On this picture, possibility is in a sense very *cheap*: this vindicates our usual readiness to describe something as possible on quick inspection.

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2.2 Two theses

Some presumptions:

- The things that are possible or not are *situations* or *states of affairs*
- Examples: Amy's being happy, Basil's being in love with Clara
- Situations are abstract entities that obtain or not, akin to properties that are instantiated or not
- For every situation there is at least one sentence that expresses it (as a predicate *expresses* a property but doesn't *name* it)
- It's possible for there to be multiple non-synonymous sentences all of which express the same situation

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2.2 Two theses

First thesis

- A situation x is possible iff (and in virtue of the fact that) there is nothing about the nature of x that prevents x from obtaining.

Second thesis

- There is something about the nature of a situation x that prevents x from obtaining iff there exist sentences S and IE such that (i) S expresses x; (ii) IE expresses essential truths (including identity truths using rigid designators); and (iii) the conjunction of S and IE is evidently self-contradictory.

Comments:

- If there is something about the nature of the situation that prevents it from obtaining, there are essential truths the entities constituting the situation that explain this prevention; the relevant conjunction S&IE provides the explanation.
- For anything whatsoever, it lies in the nature of that thing that it be itself. Essential truths include identity statements using rigid designators and are (redundantly) included in 'IE'.

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2.3 The plausibility of this picture

- Getting a fix on strict possibility and necessity: "what God could make happen/actualize"
- Since this appeals to *omnipotence*, it appeals to limits that reflect *strict* necessity.
- The principle seems to be: a situation is possible unless something either in its own nature or something about its own nature in combination with God's actualizing activity prevents it from obtaining.
- Theists recognize the independent possibility of situations even when they cannot be brought about by God — cf. Plantinga's famous points about God's "strongly actualizing" a world where agents always freely do the right thing.

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2.4 Competing metaphysics of possibility

- Lewis-style concrete worlds:
 - On that view, a situation only gets to be possible by there being an appropriate concrete world
 - Of course, Lewis's view *deserves* an incredulous stare.
- Possibilities grounded in the powers of actually existing things
 - Reinterpretation of the "what God could actualize" heuristic: some actual thing could or could not bring it about.
 - Problem: Defies intuition that there could have been nothing at all—or at least, nothing with the ability to make things happen.
 - Problem: Aggravates the epistemic problems with modality, as establishing possibility may require establishing the actual existence of a relevant power.

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3. A priori access thus far

- 3.1 A very limited guarantee
- 3.2 The strategy: essences
- 3.3 The strategy: nontrivial identities

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3.1 A very limited guarantee

- If we grant that the theses set out earlier are themselves a priori and that we can a priori detect evident self-contradictions, we can get a very weak a priori conditional.
- Suppose it is metaphysically necessary that P. It follows that:
there are sentences S_1, S_2, \dots such that any situation in which P is false is one that can be expressed by some S_i of S_1, S_2, \dots ; and for each S_i of S_1, S_2, \dots there is some IE_i such that IE_i is a true statement about essences and the conjunction of S_i and IE_i is evidently self-contradictory.
- Let "**S_i**" be the sentence named by " S_i " and "**IE_i**" be the sentence named by " IE_i ."
- The upshot is that it is a priori knowable that
*If **IE₁** and **IE₂** and ... if any situation in which it is not the case that P, **S₁** or **S₂** or ... then it is metaphysically necessary that P.*

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3.1 A very limited guarantee

- Two antecedents: how might one know either of these?
(1) Any situation in which it is not the case that P is the case that either S_1 or S_2 or ...
(2) IE_1 and IE_2 and ...
- Possible routes for (1):
"Not- P " might a priori entail the disjunction " S_1 or S_2 or ..."
"Not- P " might a priori entail that disjunction when supplemented with nontrivial true identity statements
In some cases we might have a quasi-inductive case for thinking (1) is true on the grounds of having reviewed a wide variety of situations.
- The bigger issue: is there any a priori route to knowing (2)?

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3.2 The strategy: essences

- A traditional story:
For at least some cases, grasping a concept includes knowing what *kind* of thing the concept could pick out, and this in turn requires implicit knowledge of at least some essential truths about what the concept might pick out.
- Compatibility with famous Kripke/Putnam cases:
Having the concept of water may include knowing that *if* the actual samples of water in my environment are made of H_2O , then it is essential to water that if something is water, it contains hydrogen.
- Not every concept will provide even such conditional a priori knowledge.
- And even such conditional a priori knowledge may fail to include in the consequent *all* the truths essential to the nature of the relevant entity.

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3.2 The strategy: essences

- A (bold?) conjecture:
- For every entity e and " P " such that it lies in the nature of e that P , there is some concept C , perhaps graspable only by a godlike being, such that (i) C picks out e and (ii) someone who grasps C can know a priori that it lies in the nature of e that P .
 - Not so bold if it's independently plausible that the realm of abstracta, including concepts, is densely populated.
- But then what?
- Suppose it is true that it lies in the nature of a that P , where " a " is understood using some concept that does not make it a priori knowable that it lies in the nature of a that P .
 - What a priori access is there then to *that* EN-truth?
 - Given the conjecture, there is some concept such that, using that for " b ", it is a priori knowable that it lies in the nature of b that P .
 - The big question is then: is there any a priori access to knowing that $a = b$?

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3.3 The strategy: nontrivial identities

- The general strategy: if both " a " and " b " refer to the same thing, then there is some conditional with " $a = b$ " as the consequent where the entire conditional is a priori knowable.
- If we place no restrictions on the conditional, this is trivial, as there is always this conditional, which is surely a priori:
If $a = b$, then $a = b$.
- The remaining sections focus on whether this general strategy can be carried out without collapsing into triviality.

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4. Knowledge of meaning and a priori access

- 4.1 Knowing the content of your own thoughts
- 4.2 Access without apriority?
- 4.3 The intuitive case against merely empirical access
- 4.4 Three tasks for the semantic rationalist

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4.1 Knowing the content of your own thoughts

- In *some* sense, one must have privileged access to the content of one's own thoughts. But what is that sense?
- Let C_1 and C_2 be concepts expressed by predicates ' FC_1 ' and ' FC_2 '
 - *Trivial read*: I know that if my concept C_1 picks out anything, it picks out the property of being FC_1 .
 - *Crazy read*: If my concepts C_1 and C_2 in fact pick out the same thing, I know that being $FC_1 =$ being FC_2 .
 - *The substantive non-crazy read*: If my concepts C_1 and C_2 in fact pick out the same thing, I can, given appropriate information about my situation, determine that being $FC_1 =$ being FC_2 .
- If the last is ensured by knowing what we mean, does it give us reason to expect appropriate a priori conditionals with the nontrivial identities as consequents?

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4.2 Access without apriority?

- Objection: why not say that I can determine the nontrivial identity by using exclusively empirical methods?
 - ① If [insert relevant information] then being $FC_1 =$ being FC_2
- Could (1) be something that is just empirically plausible whenever someone knows what she means?
- Suppose it is conceivable that the antecedent holds and the consequent does not.
- Either there is some expanded antecedent that would close the question or there isn't. (Set aside the trivial case.)
- If there isn't, then no matter how much additional (nontrivial) information one gains, it still may turn out that you're wrong about what your concepts pick out.
- Is this an acceptable consequence?

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4.3 The intuitive case against mere empirical accessibility

- An intuitive case for finding that consequence unacceptable.
- Epistemicism about vagueness:
 - There are sharp cut-off points for "vague" predicates even though we cannot know what they are.
- Near-universal reaction: this is a crazy view!
- Suppose the epistemicist adds:
 - We can know a priori what sorts of facts determine the cut-off points even if actually coming to know those facts is beyond our capability.
- Then it seems not crazy at all. What lesson should we draw?

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4.1 Access without apriority?

- What is intuitively objectionable:
the idea that we could not, even on ideal reflection, recognize the facts that determine the content of our thoughts as determining that content.
- If we recognize those facts as *determining* that content, we seem them as *closing the question*: a priori, if those facts obtain, then the content is such and such.
- The a priori conditionals I am after might have antecedents that cannot be known to be true.

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4.3 Three tasks for the semantic rationalist

- While there is intuitive reason to require a priori access as just described, there are three major tasks for the semantic rationalist:
 - 1) Apriority and authority
Explain why a thinker's judgements on reflection about coreference should or even can have authority regarding those facts. What could make them reliable? Why trust those over other theoretically backed judgements?
 - 2) The characterization of inputs and outputs
The semantic rationalist requires there to be in effect an a priori knowable function from information that may determine semantic values to information about those values. How exactly should these inputs and outputs be characterized?
 - 3) Triviality worries
Does the semantic rationalist position succeed only if it allows in as an antecedent the same truths that are to appear in the consequent?

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5. Towards semantic rationalism

- 5.1 Authority: a constitutive approach
- 5.2 Authority: an argument for inevitability
- 5.3 Outputs: first-order vs. second-order
- 5.4 Inputs: semantic vs. metaphysical fundamentality
- 5.5 Normative supervenience and non-triviality

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5.1 Authority: a constitutive approach

- On ideal reflection, Amy finds it compelling that if ... then her concepts C_1 and C_2 corefer.
- What could make this judgement reliable?
Facts about the semantic values of mental states are plausibly determined at least in part by the role those states play in the thinker's cognitive economy, including that segment of it which houses reflection on what one means.
One's dispositions to arrive at such judgements can thus help determine that those judgements are true.
- The Humpty Dumpty objection:
You presume that my thoughts are like a public language and that I stand behind them, giving them their meaning by a stipulation (like Humpty Dumpty).

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5.1 Authority: a constitutive approach

- Response: Need not presume that meaning is conferred by decision or stipulation!
- All that is needed is that whatever determines meaning obeys a kind of rationality constraint (hardly an unprecedented idea in theory of meaning).
- The key idea:
 - Part of what makes a mental item have such-and-such content is its being part of an overall system that is rational in the right way, where this rationality *includes the thinker's own readiness on reflection to sanction that interpretation of the item.*
 - That readiness to sanction is a *necessary* condition on having that content, not a Humpty-Dumpty-ish story giving the whole explanation of what makes it have that content.

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5.2 Authority: an argument for inevitability

- Suppose a third-person theorist with access to the same facts as Amy arrives at a different conclusion.
- Even if that theorist has discerned something about a genuine semantic relation, it is not a relation that *Amy* need care about.
 - Compare: the theorist who arrives at conclusion that "God" refers to a powerful wizard on Saturn (who, say, actually caused the use of the term, etc.). Users of the term would ignore this conclusion.
- Supposing that there is some assignment of semantic values that conforms to Amy's a priori judgements, that assignment provides a kind of semantic content that inevitably is of interest to her.
- *It is inevitably of interest because it tracks her own idealized judgements to which she must, by hypothesis, defer.*
- Other semantic assignments are only potentially of interest.

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5.3 Outputs: first-order vs. second-order

- What exactly should the "outputs" (that which is in the consequent of the a priori conditional) be?
 - ① If ... then C_1 and C_2 corefer
 - ② If ... then *being* $FC_1 = \text{being } FC_2$
- Two unhappy consequences of opting for (1):

It suggests a picture of the thinker appealing to a background theory of concepts and content determination, which makes her seem rather like the third-person theorist.

It requires that the person arriving at this conditional have meta-concepts.
- Opt for (2) with this proviso:

The thinker in arriving at a priori knowledge of (2) is *using* distinct concepts C_1 and C_2 and is such that were she to gain the meta-concepts, she would immediately know (1) on the basis of her knowledge of (2).

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5.4 Inputs: semantic vs. metaphysical fundamentality

- Suppose physicalism true, so that all the facts are (in some sense) ultimately physical.
- A tempting move (made by Frank Jackson): since they are all physical, the antecedent in a priori conditionals can always be given in physical terms.
- This neglects potential opacity. Suppose that "M" and "P" corefer and (1) and (2) are two conditionals reflecting how some semantic value is determined:
 - ① If ... **a** has M ... then ...
 - ② If ... **a** has P ... then ...
- What is a priori knowable may be limited to (1), even if it is the same "information" as (2).

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5.4 Inputs: semantic vs. metaphysical fundamentality

- Lesson: the metaphysically fundamental need not be what is semantically fundamental.
- To be "semantically fundamental" here is to reflect the way the thinker grasps the facts that he potentially a priori knows to be relevant to determining the contents of his thoughts.
- As the semantically fundamental need not be the metaphysically fundamental, we face these questions:
- What should we assume about how the relevant determining facts are grasped by the thinker?
- Might the semantically fundamental fail to exclude propositions that *trivialize* the conditionals in question?

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5.5 Normative supervenience and non-triviality

- The threat of trivialization
Without constraints on the character of the antecedent (input), it might include the same information as in the consequent.
If the only a priori conditional we can be sure is available has this character, semantic rationalism is itself trivial.
- A restriction we might impose:
The antecedent cannot include any explicitly semantic information or non-trivial identities (understood as carrying semantic information).
- This leaves us free to include metaphysically non-fundamental information in the antecedent.
- But is this restriction warranted in some principled fashion?

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5.5 Normative supervenience and non-triviality

- Is the restriction principled? A strategy:
 - Judgements about meaning—especially in the first-person—are to be understood as essentially *normative*.
 - When I judge that $x = y$, I am obligated to treat "x" and "y" interchangeably.
 - Normative facts are necessarily supervenient on non-normative facts
 - So, the a priori conditionals in question plausibly conform to this pattern by having antecedents restricted to non-normative (and hence non-semantic) facts.
 - Otherwise put: the semantically fundamental need not be metaphysically fundamental generally, but it need be fundamental relative to semantic/normative facts.

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6. A priori vindication

- The claim:
For any MN-truth or EN-truth, there is some a priori knowable and non-trivial conditional with that truth as the consequent.
- Given semantic rationalism, there is such a conditional for each non-trivial identity truth.
- For any essential truth, it is either knowable a priori directly via grasping the relevant concept or indirectly by grasping that concept and adding a nontrivial identity.
- Hence, there's an a priori conditional of the needed sort with the essential truth as the consequent—since we can include enough in the antecedent to get the needed non-trivial identity that may be needed to facilitate getting that essential truth.

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6. A priori vindication

- Since we have this conditional a priori access to identities and essential truths, this information can then be used to combine with what we can know a priori about necessities to get access to any metaphysical necessity.
- On the picture of modality from before, if it is metaphysically necessary that P, then any situation in which it is not true that P will be one that can be expressed by some sentence that, when conjoined with true identities and essential truths, is evidently self contradictory.
- In this way a priori access to the non-trivial identities yields a priori access to knowing which situations are impossible—and hence to the necessary truths.

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Feedback much appreciated

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