

Part IA, Paper 3 Logic

Q. Are there any contingent a priori truths?

A. In what follows I shall argue that there are at least three classes of contingent a priori truth: two of them (truths with one rigid and one nonrigid designator that are knowable in virtue of meaning, and truths with indexicals) a priori in virtue of their analyticity, and one (that 'I exist') in virtue of their being presupposed by the very thinking of them. But first I will define my terms.

A contingent truth is false in at least one possible world and true in this one. This is a metaphysical notion, opposed to that of a necessary truth (true in all possible worlds). An a priori truth is a true proposition that can be known independently of experience, once the concepts involved have their meaning fixed. Such a proposition may well come to be known via experience, but it must be possible to justify (on some understanding of the term sufficient to render true belief knowledge: I will not engage in an epistemological debate here) one's believing it without experience. This distinguishes it from an a posteriori truth, which requires such experience. There seem to me to be two ways one might justify a belief that P a priori: P might be true in virtue of the meanings of the words involved, or P might be presupposed by the very thoughts that constitute the belief.

On the standard view, there are no contingent a priori truths. The motivation for this seems to be as follows: if a proposition is contingent, then there are worlds where it is false. But prior to experience, we cannot tell if our world is one of these. So such a proposition must be a posteriori. Or, in other words, if P can be known to be true a priori, it doesn't matter what world greets us when we examine our experience: it must be true in any world. I will show that such a view is false.

First, Kripke's examples with rigid designators. A rigid designator refers to the same object in all possible worlds. Kripke gives names and natural kind terms as examples, but it will be less controversial and reveal more clearly the underlying logic of the cases to use 'rigidified' definite descriptions, which pick out some actual object in all possible worlds. Contrast an ordinary description, which picks out in each world whatever object satisfies the description in that world (rather than in ours). We can now demonstrate the existence of a contingent a priori truth:

- 1) 'The actual author of *Ulysses* is the author of *Ulysses*' is true in this world

- 2) 'The actual author of *Ulysses* is the author of *Ulysses*' is knowable a priori
- 3) There is at least one possible world where 'the actual author of *Ulysses* is the author of *Ulysses*' is false
- 4) 'The actual author of *Ulysses* is the author of *Ulysses*' is a contingent truth (from 1 and 3)
- 5) So there is at least one contingent a priori truth (from 2 and 4)

The argument is valid. Is it sound? 1) is a fact, 3) is also a fact. While one might think the author of *Ulysses* must be such in all worlds, we are talking about the individual who wrote it in this world, i.e. James Joyce. And Joyce might have done any number of other things instead. 4) is therefore true because of the definition of a contingent truth. There is admittedly, however, a slight issue with 2). For if 'the actual author of *Ulysses* is the author of *Ulysses*' is to be true, James Joyce must exist. But we cannot know this a priori. This can be quite easily fixed however, by modifying our truth, substituting in lines 1) – 4) 'the actual author of *Ulysses*, if he exists, is the author of *Ulysses*'. This fixes the problem. I can prove that this is true simply in virtue of the meanings of the words and the rules of logic: indeed, it is not only analytic but a logical truth. The argument then, is sound, and we have a contingent a priori truth.

But there are other kinds of contingent a priori truths. Suppose I believe the following: 'I am here'. 'I' and 'here' are indexicals, and refer to some specific thing relative to the context of utterance. They refer to the respective referents in all possible worlds. But the referents are not identical, and so the proposition is contingent. Yet I can know in virtue of the meaning (or following Kaplan, the character that determines context) of both words that 'I am here' in this world, for each specifies my current location. The proposition is thus knowable a priori. We have, therefore, another class of contingent a priori truths. The difference from the last class, I think, is that here both terms seem to be rigid, but designate different things. Yet still the meanings guarantee truth in this world. Another difference is that we need not add an '...if I exist' clause this time. Why? Because I can know this, too, a priori: to this I now turn.

'I exist' is true. I do. But I might not have: there are plenty of worlds where I don't exist. So the truth is contingent. But I need not consult experience to know that I exist. So it is a priori. How can this be so? Nothing in the meaning of 'I' entails my existence. Indeed, since Kant it has been considered implausible that any concept

might include existence independent of that concept's instantiation. But without experience – with only the relevant concepts and the rules of logic – how can I justify the belief that 'I exist'? Because the truth of this belief is presupposed by the very thoughts that form it. For propositional attitudes make no sense apart from a subject, however minimal (I cannot justify a priori, for example, my existence at any other time than right now). Something must believe that 'I exist'. And so I can know this a priori: the belief justifies itself. 'I exist' then, is another contingent a priori truth.

One might criticise this argument. First, how do I know that there is some self, an 'I' behind the thoughts that occur? This objection supposes that thoughts can exist independently of a subject: I do not think that this reification of thought is plausible, but even if it is, one can construct a similar example from 'there are thoughts'. Second, do I not require some experience of my own thought to see that it presupposes my existence? This will depend on what we consider relevant 'experience' when classifying a priori knowledge. It seems to me that if we allow conceptual 'experience' we might also allow experience of my current thoughts. But if not, no matter: we already have our contingent a priori truths from other sources, and can relinquish this one without issue.

In conclusion: 'the actual author of *Ulysses* is the author of *Ulysses*' is a contingent a priori truth. 'I am here' is a contingent a priori truth. 'I exist' certainly seems to me to be a contingent a priori truth. There are many more like these. Therefore there are contingent a priori truths.

Comments

The candidate's command of the topic is shown by the candidate's familiarity with a range of technical terms (a priori, contingent, rigidity etc.). The candidate's understanding of the question set is shown by the fact that all the arguments he/she presents are relevant and plausible and show knowledge of the literature. The organization of the essay is shown by the fact that the candidate sets out the plan in the first paragraph and clearly signposts the main argument. The clarity of expression is shown by the fact that the candidate writes in simple English using short sentences. The digressions are few, relevant and clearly signposted. The cogency of the argument is shown by the fact that the candidate presents separate arguments for the premises of valid arguments for his/her conclusion. A solid first-class answer.