

THE RATIONALIST'S DILEMMA

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Abstract

In his book In Defense of Pure Reason Laurence Bonjour proposed an account of a priori justification which essentially refers to so-called rational insights. Unfortunately, the reader is not equipped with a substantial answer to the question what such rational insights exactly are. And moreover, he is told that this is not an in any way decisive shortcoming of Bonjour's account of a priori justification — at least not a shortcoming which should motivate us to abandon his account. In order to support this thesis, Bonjour refers to an analogy between the case of rational insights and the case of consciousness. He points out that we would not give up the use of the notion of consciousness, in spite of the fact that today there is still no satisfying answer to the question what consciousness exactly is.

I will argue that the analogy Bonjour refers to is in fact a persuasive one and can help him as well as other proponents of the rational-insight account to deal with some prominent objections. But taking the analogy seriously does consequently mean to undermine a favourite rationalist's thesis: the autonomy claim. I conclude that the rationalist is confronted with a dilemma; he simply cannot have it both ways.

1. Bonjour's basic idea

Some philosophers introduce their accounts through the back door, so to speak. Bit by bit, paper by paper, and year by year, they paint different parts of their own big picture. Now, this is surely not the way Bonjour presented his account of a priori justification. Published in the year 1998, his book *In Defense of Pure Reason* was meant to be a drumbeat. It was meant to be a drumbeat and a polemic for a faculty on which most contemporary epistemologists already pronounced the death sentence.

In order to explain a priori justification, Bonjour refers to certain “intellectual acts” of the reasoner, traditionally called “rational insights”. Those acts enable the reasoner to recognise the truth of the propositions he considers. In order to illustrate his line of thought, Bonjour cites the proposition that nothing can

be simultaneously red all over and green all over, and remarks that, given our understanding of the ingredients of the proposition . . .

. . . I am able to see or grasp or apprehend in a seemingly direct and unmediated way that the claim in question cannot fail to be true — that the natures of redness and greenness are such as to preclude their being jointly realized. [. . .] It is common to refer to the intellectual act in which the necessity of such a proposition is seen or grasped or apprehended as an act of *rational insight* or *rational intuition* [. . .] where these phrases are mainly a way of stressing that such an act is seemingly (a) direct or immediate, non-discursive, and yet also (b) intellectual or reason-governed, anything but arbitrary in character. (BonJour 1998, p. 101)

Unnecessary to say, BonJour has to explain several things: Most importantly, what are the advantages of such an explanation of *a priori* justification? Why be inclined to believe that an appeal to such intellectual acts (or the ability to perform such an act) should do a better job than the explanations of *a priori* justification considered by the proponents of other accounts? Basically, there are two kinds of strategies available: A *positive* argument would rely on citing the advantages of the account in question; with the help of a *negative* argument we would point out that the account in question simply has fewer shortcomings than other available accounts. In his book *In Defense of Pure Reason* as well as in some more recent writings (2001a, 2001b), BonJour pursued the second strategy.

So the questions BonJour has to answer are firstly: in which way are other explanations of *a priori* justification untenable? Secondly: in which way does his own explanation overcome the shortcomings in question? And thirdly: why are the shortcomings his own explanation does exhibit in fact tenable?

In order to answer the *first* question, BonJour presents reasons in the first half of his book *In Defense of Pure Reason* (BonJour 1998, ch. 1 and 2). In particular, he criticises the analytic explanation of *a priori* knowledge and explains that this type of explanation is confronted with serious and practically intractable problems. Because it is clearly beyond the scope of this paper to reconstruct BonJour's criticism at length, I won't consider his arguments against the analytic explanation of *a priori* knowledge here. Rather I will present the reasons he cites in order to support his thesis that the reference to rational insights is more helpful than the so-called analytic explanation of *a priori* knowledge could ever be.

Let me begin with one of BonJour's examples already mentioned: the proposition that nothing can be red all over and green all over at the same time. This

proposition is necessarily true, not only in virtue of the constituent terms, but in virtue of the *fact* which the proposition refers to, or so Bonjour argues:

The sentence in question is necessarily true because it expresses a necessary relation between certain properties, and it is of course in virtue of its meaning that it does this; but the status of that relational fact as necessary and its cognitive accessibility are in no obvious way dependent on its linguistic formulation, or even, so far as I can see, on whether it happens to be linguistically formulated or formulable at all. (1998, p. 102)

Putting it into a nutshell, we can say: Whether there is the necessary relation between the properties just mentioned, or not, is independent of our language. It is not our language that creates those necessary facts; our language only puts them into words. And from such a point of view it is indeed much more natural to look at these facts on the one side and at our ability to recognise these facts on the other than to analyse our language and the meaning-relations which seem to exist.

But if Bonjour's thesis is true and it is really the existence of such an ability which is at issue here, then the following questions do arise: Why should we believe that such an ability really exists? And if such an ability exists, why should it be a possible *a priori* justifier? And if such an ability exists and in fact functions as a possible justifier, how can we adequately explain what that ability exactly is? Not that the answers to such questions are independent of each other, but they nevertheless provide a good grid for an examination of Bonjour's account.

Before considering Bonjour's answers to the questions just mentioned, I'd like to indicate that he explicitly anticipates the problem of giving an argument for such an explanation of *a priori* justification which is not deeply question-begging:

It is important to be clear at the outset, however, about what can reasonably be demanded of a defense of rationalism. 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. Thus, in a way that parallels many other philosophical issues, the case in favor of rationalism

must ultimately depend on intuitive and dialectical considerations rather than on direct argument. (BonJour 1998, p. 99)

According to BonJour, there is just a “basic intuitive or phenomenological plausibility of the view in relation to particular examples” (ibid.). Therefore, it is not surprising that BonJour does not present an *argument* for his thesis that there are rational insights and merely appeals to the reader’s intuitions.

This appeal is twofold: On the one hand, BonJour claims that we can hardly deny that the truth of some propositions is just immediately obvious to us. We do not have to draw inferences from some other, more basic propositions. On the contrary, we just *see* that the propositions in question are true. On the other hand, BonJour points out that to assume that there is in fact a faculty with which we can ‘see’ the truth of some propositions is something which suggests itself. It is simply the most obvious explanation of the fact that we can immediately recognise the truth of some propositions in the way just mentioned, or so he argues.

BonJour appeals again to the reader’s intuitions while explaining why such rational insights are *a priori* justifiers. He presents several examples as examples of rational insights, combined with the claim that it is obvious that these rational insights indeed justify the respective belief:

[I] am able to see or grasp or apprehend in a seemingly direct and unmediated way that the claim in question cannot fail to be true [...]. It is this direct insight into the necessity of the claim in question that seems, at least *prima facie*, to justify my accepting it as true. (1998, p. 101)

It is remarkable how often BonJour explicitly indicates that he is arguing at an ‘intuitive level’.¹ So again, it does not surprise the reader that BonJour does not give us any substantial answer to the third question mentioned above, the question about what rational insights exactly are like — at least not in the sense indicated by the question itself:

There is, to be sure, one reasonably clear sense in which many alleged rational or *a priori* insights are, if not necessarily *mysterious*, at least *inexplicable* in the sense of being apparently *irreducible*: they are apparently incapable of being reduced to or constituted out of some constellation of discursive steps or simpler cognitive elements of some other kind. But once it is realized that any such reduction would have to appeal to other apparent insights of a similar sort and thus ultimately, if an infinite regress

is ruled out, to irreducible ones [...] it is hard to see why this admitted irreducibility should be thought to justify the charge of objectionable mysteriousness or lack of intelligibility. Moreover, if the implicit demand for reducibility is set aside as unwarranted and the alleged rational or *a priori* insight is examined for intelligibility on its own merits, it is extremely difficult [...] to see any serious basis for the charge of mysteriousness. [...] Contrary to the claim of mysteriousness, it is hard to see that there is anything in our cognitive experience that is, at first glance at least, any more transparently and pellucidly intelligible, any *less* mysterious than this. (BonJour 1998, p. 108)

As I mentioned above, BonJour's defense of an account of *a priori* justification which heavily relies on rational insights was meant to be a drumbeat. Now drumbeats are likely to cause echoes. And indeed, many different objections against BonJour's account have been raised during the last few years. In the following, I will present only three of them: *the mysteriousness objection*, *the seeing objection* and *the access objection*.

2. Some well-known criticism

Firstly, the *mysteriousness objection*. To put it most simply, this objection says that BonJour's reference to something like 'rational insights' is much too mysterious that it can be helpful in any way. At least until today, no one ever succeeded in explaining what such rational insights exactly are. And admittedly, this seems to be a very straightforward and obvious objection that comes to the mind of BonJour's reader. However, it is also ambiguous. We should be aware of the fact that there are (at least) two components within the rationalist's model which demand for an explanation. It is therefore useful to decide two problems; I'll call them the *input problem* and the *mechanism problem*. According to the *input problem*, it is not clear what the input of the process of rational intuition amounts to. In which way does it differ from the inputs to sensory perception? According to the *mechanism problem*, it is completely unclear how to explain that rational insights yield direct insights about the necessity of certain claims. What are the respective mechanisms like?

Now one of the most prominent proponents of the mysteriousness objection is Paul Boghossian. He points out that

[t]he single most influential consideration against rational insight theories can be stated quite simply: no one has been able to explain—

clearly enough—in what an act of rational insight could intelligibly consist. That is, no one has been able to say how some cognitive act, of a sort that we might plausibly enjoy, is able to yield immediate knowledge of the modal properties of properties. If the theory of rational insight is to serve as a genuine *explanation* for how we are able to have such a priori knowledge, rather than simply acting as a placeholder for such an explanation, it must consist in more than a suggestive label; it must somehow lay bare, in appropriate detail, how some capacity that we have gets to work on the properties we are able to think about so as to disclose their natures. (Boghossian 2001, p. 636)

It seems to me pretty obvious that Boghossian is mainly concerned with the mechanism problem, and not with the input problem.

How does BonJour react? He claims that he is not convinced. He rejects the mysteriousness objection—and more exactly the mechanism problem — with the help of an analogy: On the one side, he admits that nobody ever succeeded in explaining what rational insights exactly are. On the other side, he draws the reader's attention to the fact that the same objection could be applied to many cases in philosophy. A case in point is the debate about consciousness. Here, too, no one ever succeeded in explaining what consciousness exactly is, or so BonJour argues. However, would we therefore reject consciousness as something which is just too mysterious? Surely not (cf. BonJour 2001b, p. 674).

One may reply that this argumentation is not very convincing. To be sure, it would be absurd to claim that there is no consciousness, just because we actually have no widely held explication of consciousness. But the claim that consciousness exists is much more widely held than the claim that there are rational insights. And in so far, the case of consciousness and the case of rational insights are not exactly parallel, as BonJour wants to make us believe. BonJour anticipates this objection and his reply refers to his master argument:

I am not suggesting, of course, that the existence of rational insights is as obvious as the existence of consciousness. [...] This is why it was necessary to buttress the appeals to examples with further arguments of a more dialectical sort, centering around what I refer to [...] as the master argument. (2001b, p. 674)

The master argument BonJour just alluded to goes as follows:

- (P1) [W]hile some of the things we believe are presumably justified in some way by direct experience or direct observation, without the need for infer-

ence or argument, there are many other things that we take ourselves to be justified in believing for which this is not so. (BonJour 2001a, p. 625)

- (P2) [A]ny justification of these further beliefs seems to inevitably require a transition of a broadly inferential sort from the deliverances of direct experience or observation to these various further claims (ibid.)
- (P3) Such a transition from an experiential premise [...] to a further conclusion that goes beyond experience obviously cannot be justified by the experiential premise alone, and so it must either be justified *a priori* or else not justified at all (ibid.)
- (P4) Rejecting *a priori* justification would imply skepticism.
- (P5) (Implicit) No one wants to commit himself to skepticism.
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Therefore: There are *a priori* justified beliefs.

The basic idea of this master argument is simple: *If you don't accept my claim that there are rational insights which function as possible a priori justifiers, then you have to bite the bullet and commit yourself to skepticism. Since you surely don't want to commit yourself to skepticism, you have to accept my claim.* — This would have to be at least the basic idea if BonJour wants to convince us that there is something like a rational insights which do function as a possible *a priori* justifiers. Unfortunately, it is not the idea straightforwardly expressed by the master argument. If we believe that the master argument is sound, we also have to believe that there is *a priori* knowledge, not only that there are rational insights which function as *a priori* justifiers. In order to get the basic simple idea first mentioned, we would have to believe that all other explanations of *a priori* knowledge currently available are *not* tenable. This again, refers to the part of BonJour's book I have not discussed here — the part in which he presents and rejects other prominent explanations of *a priori* knowledge.

But even if my discussion of this part of BonJour's argumentation has to keep offstage for now, I would like to indicate where a difficulty of the master argument may lie. As I just mentioned, BonJour presents the master argument because he thinks that relying on appeals to examples of *prima facie* cases of *a priori* justification is not enough. Now such a line of argumentation is only reasonable if the master argument is sufficiently independent of appeals to examples. Otherwise, it would fail to have the intended function; it would not be able to buttress the appeals to examples. Unfortunately, BonJour's master argument is quite obviously not sufficiently independent of the appeals to examples; in fact, it is grounded on such appeals. To be sure, the only way to convince someone about the truth of

the claims Bonjour just presented would be to cite an example and appeal to the intuition of the reader that this is clearly an example of a belief which is either justified *a priori* or not justified at all. The example Bonjour seems to appeal to is logic, so that the reader agrees with him in claiming that there is some kind of knowledge which cannot be empirical in character. If this is true, and the master argument does in fact heavily relies on an appeal to examples, then it presupposes the very same thing it has been created to argue for.

One may reply, *firstly*, that I misunderstood the main function of the master argument. With the master argument Bonjour simply intends to support his claim that rationalism is a better explanation than the available non-sceptical competitors. Now both rationalism and the competing accounts are meant to explain examples in which we seem to be justified in believing something simply through the direct apprehension of reason. Just to point out that Bonjour is appealing to examples in his master argument is therefore no argument against his strategy, or so one may argue.

However, such a reply is not very convincing. *Firstly*, the master argument simply does not support the claim that rationalism is a better explanation than the available non-sceptical competitors. All it supports is the thesis that we have to accept that there *a priori* justified beliefs, if we don't want to commit ourselves to skepticism. *Secondly*, it is surely true that rationalists as well as the proponents of their competing accounts try to explain examples in which we seem to be justified in believing something simply through the direct apprehension of reason. But again, the master argument does not *explain* such examples, it only *appeals* to them. To be sure, I don't want to deny that the master argument has indeed a certain function. However, I think we can reasonably doubt that it fulfills the function Bonjour ascribed to it.

One may reply, *secondly*, that Bonjour's master argument does not appeal to examples in any way. When he is pointing out that beliefs about "the past, the future, and the unobserved aspects of the present" (1998, p. 4) cannot be justified by experience alone, then he says something widely accepted, perhaps even a truism. But he surely doesn't appeal to specific examples, or so one may argue.

This is not very convincing. The claim Bonjour proposes is no truism, at least from the naturalistic standpoint. It is a truism that many things are not directly observable by us. But from that truism it just does not follow in an equally obvious way that the beliefs which we acquire not by *direct* observation are not justified by experience at all.

One may reply, *thirdly*, that the way in which Bonjour appeals to examples

with his master argument is in no way relevant to his claim that “the genuineness of such [rational] insights can be questioned in ways that consciousness itself cannot” and that “[t]his is why it was necessary to buttress the appeals to examples with further arguments of a more dialectical sort”. And this is so because, basically, these are two different ways of appealing to examples.

I can't see how such an argumentation should work. *Firstly*, there are no general differences between the way in which BonJour appeals to examples in order to make plausible that there are rational insights, and the way in which he supports his master argument. Besides that, it is not important whether the several examples to which he appeals are different. What is important is the fact that in his argumentation he heavily relies on the appeals to examples. And that is exactly the thing BonJour wanted to avoid.

But let me come back to the analogy between rational insights and consciousness, mentioned by BonJour. If I am right about the function of BonJour's master argument, then we have to rely on this analogy in order to reject the mysteriousness objection. And I think that the analogy between the case of rational insights and consciousness has in fact some persuasive force. To stop talking about consciousness only because we don't have any widely held explanation would indeed be absurd. And why not think of rational insights in a similar way? Unfortunately, the analogy does not come for free, at least for the rationalist. But I will come back to that later. First, we have to consider two further objections against BonJour's account.

The *second* objection I will discuss here is the *seeing objection*. This objection concerns BonJour's metaphorical use of 'seeing'. In order to explain rational insights, BonJour points out that in some cases, we just 'see' that a proposition is necessarily true, i.e. we just 'see' that nothing can be all over red and green all over at the same time. It is now very seductive to make out an analogy to sense perception. Do we have to think of a rational 'seeing' in the same way as we think of normal visual seeing? BonJour denies that. And apparently, he has good reasons for his denial: In the case of sense perception, there is some kind of causal relationship between our thoughts and the things in the outside world (which those thoughts are about). In some sense, the blue sky which I see while opening my eyes is causally responsible for my *belief* that the sky is blue today. In the case of rational insights, such a simple story is not available: if we 'see' the validity of modus ponens, that validity is an abstract entity. But then, in which way is that abstract entity responsible for our respective thought that modus ponens is a valid inference schema? BonJour suggests that in the case of rational insights, we

have to think in other terms. It is not the causal relationship between the object and the thought which determines that the object is the content of the thought, it is rather the purely intrinsic properties of the thought itself, which determine what that thought is about (cf. also Boghossian 2001, p. 636). But how could that be the case? If Paul has a thought about triangularity, is that thought itself triangular? Surely not.

However, I don't think that Bonjour has to engage with such an argumentation in the first place. Relying on the analogy between consciousness and rational insights, he may argue as follows: The phrase "to see" in a sentence like "I see that modus ponens is a valid inference schema" is a flowery phrase. It is a flowery phrase in the same way as the phrase "it feels like" in "how it feels like to be bat". Such flowery phrases are used to denote coherences and processes described by philosophers to which we don't have full linguistic access, but which we nevertheless know very well, in some sense. Look at the debate about consciousness. The philosophical flowery phrase "what it is like" is so well established that no clear-headed philosopher would reject an explanation of consciousness only because the respective account is not in a position to put that phrase into words. To be sure, we *have* to give an explanation what these relations between abstract entities and our beliefs about those entities are like. But we equally have to anticipate the possibility that, firstly, that task is not the most urgent one and, secondly, that that task is not a genuinely philosophical one. I will come back to that later.

One *third* argument against Bonjour's account is the *access objection*. In order to argue for his thesis that there are *a priori* justified beliefs, Bonjour presents some *prima facie* cases of *a priori* justified beliefs and argues that in all those cases we just see that the respective proposition is true. One of the most prominent examples in that vicinity is the red green-example already considered in this paper. In order to remind the reader: if we are thinking that nothing can be red and green all over, then, according to Bonjour,

[a]fter extremely brief consideration, I accept the proposition (or inference) and moreover am strongly inclined at the intuitive level to think that such an acceptance is more than adequately justified from an epistemic standpoint, that is, that I have a good, indeed an excellent reason for thinking that the claim in question is true... (1998, p. 101)

Now one may argue that from the fact that I can't imagine something which is red and green all over, it just does not follow that there is in fact nothing which is not red and green all over. *Prima facie*, I only found out something about my

imaginative powers, or so Gilbert Harman (2001, p. 660) points out. Moreover, the alleged red green-incompatibility could also be just an illusion, and nothing more. Harman asks us to

[s]uppose an object looks red from one angle and green from a slightly different angle. In that case, might we not say that the object is red all over and also green all over, even though one cannot see both colors at the same time? (Harman 2001, p. 661)

In a recent publication (2001b), BonJour considers both considerations as absolutely not decisive. His basic point is here simply to point out that he is not committed to the thesis that the beliefs, resulting of rational insights, are in any way infallible. They may very well be fallible. And here again, in the light of the consciousness analogy mentioned above, we can complete his reply in the following way: consciousness is in the same way fallible as rational insights. We nevertheless usually claim that the belief we have on the basis of empirical intuitions are justified. And so in the case of rational insights. Although they may be fallible, they can yield justified beliefs.

We have considered three arguments against BonJour's account of *a priori* justification. Up to here, the analogy between rational insights and consciousness turned out to be a useful one in rejecting such arguments. Unfortunately, the analogy does not comes for free. In order to see this, we first have to look at one of BonJour's more general claims: the autonomy claim.

3. The autonomy claim

According to the *autonomy claim*, there is no need to consult the empirical sciences, no need to use the results of their investigations in order to explain *a priori* knowledge. I have to emphasise that BonJour does not explicitly propose the autonomy claim. But I think that the way in which he examines *a priori* knowledge is shaped by this claim. It just does not occur to BonJour to ask scientists (e.g. psychologists) about what rational insights are or how widely they are shared. Even if I am wrong and BonJour would not propose the autonomy claim, that would not destroy the argument which I will present now. Some other rationalists are much more determined when it comes to that claim, most prominently George Bealer. In a recent publication, he characterises the autonomy claim as the claim that, “[a]mong the central questions of philosophy that can be answered by one standard theoretical means or another, most can in principle

be answered by philosophical investigation and argument without relying substantively on the sciences” (Bealer 1996, p. 121). So just think as of Bonjour instead of some other prominent proponent of the rational-insights account and the autonomy claim. That will do.

The autonomy claim is a favourite thesis of the majority of all contemporary rationalists. There is at least no other plausible explanation of the fact that no prominent rationalist consults the empirical sciences before he refers to rational insights. It is not obvious to many of us why we don’t have to ask the sciences for advice when it comes to rational insights. You may argue that they simply have no answers. Now this in fact a false claim. And even if it were true, it just would not provide us with an argument for the autonomy claim.

But let us be rationalists, even if only for the sake of argument. Qua rationalist and proponent of a rational-insight account, we have to find a way to deal with the *mysteriousness objection*. Relying on the analogy between rational insights and consciousness is one possibility. Unfortunately, proposing the autonomy claim on the one side and relying on the analogy in question on the other side, are two strategies hardly compatible.

4. The dilemma

In order to throw some light on these issues, let us take up the analogy again. According to many philosophers, consciousness is still a mystery today. Although we have many different explanations of consciousness, there is no generally accepted one. One of the reasons why this topic is so difficult is the fact that many conscious states are connected with phenomenal qualities and we simply don’t know *why*. Just imagine the way it feels like to eat ripe tomatoes. To be sure, psychologists and neurophysiologists can probably present us a story about the brain processes which go on in our brains when we are eating ripe tomatoes. In *that sense*, they can explain what a conscious state is. But in another way the concept of a conscious state is as dark as before. It is the way it feels like to be in such a conscious state. Why are those brain processes accompanied by such feelings? Why does eating a ripe tomato feel like *this* and not like *that*?

While eating a ripe tomato, most people are perhaps disposed to admit that it tastes good, if they were asked. (Except for those who don’t like ripe tomatoes at all.) More generally: If people have a certain phenomenal experience, they are disposed to act in a certain way. In order to explain why they have such a disposition, neurophysiologists are probably in the position to tell us something

about the activity of certain brain areas and psychologists something about the way people act when their brains release hormones. Provided with all those informations, we are in a position to understand very well what is going on in a person which is just eating a ripe tomato. But there is still something left out; in Levine's famous phrase, there is an *explanatory gap*: We still know nothing about how it feels to eat a ripe tomato. And this is one of the most central features responsible for the fact that consciousness seems to be such a great mystery still. On the other hand, conscious states are also something which could not be more familiar to us. Perhaps it is exactly that contrast between our inability to give a reductive explanation of consciousness on the one side and the tremendous familiarity with conscious states on the other side which makes that topic so interesting and fascinating.

Now Bonjour's idea is that rational insights are something similar, in several important respects: We are not in a position to give a reductive explanation of rational insights; rational insights are still rather mysterious. (To be sure, Bonjour would not claim that rational insights are mysterious. But I think that Bonjour would have to admit that rational insights are at least in some sense mysterious, namely in the sense that they are not explicable with reference to simpler cognitive elements.) But nevertheless, they could not be more familiar, perhaps not in the same sense of familiarity as in the case of consciousness, but almost.

If we assume with Bonjour that the consciousness case and the case of rational insights do have some central features in common, then it should be possible to investigate the more psychological or neurophysiological part of that story. I mentioned above that there seems to be no insurmountable obstacle in explaining what kinds of brain processes are going on in our heads while we have some phenomenal experience. We surely know that this cannot be the whole story, because some essential part, the phenomenal qualities of experience, is still unexplained. And surely this second, still unexplained part, is the much more difficult task waiting for us. As we all know, Chalmers nicely called the first (psychological, neurophysiological) part the 'easy problem', the second (phenomenal) part the 'hard problem' (cf. Chalmers 1996, p. xii). If Bonjour's implicit claim that there are some essential similarities between the case of consciousness and the case of rational insights is true, then we are perhaps only in the position to solve the easy problem with the aid of psychology and neurophysiology. But easy as it may be — we would have solved some problem related to rational insights.

So, there seems to be some kind of *dilemma* for the rationalist: The proponent of an account of *a priori* justification like the one Bonjour presents has to find a

good argument against the *mysteriousness objection*. One of the best arguments available heavily relies on an analogy between rational insights and consciousness. With such an argument at hand, the respective proponent can explain why we must not reject the phenomenon of rational insights in order to explain *a priori* knowledge, even if that phenomenon is still inexplicable today. At the same time, however, he has to admit that the project of investigating rational insights should be an interdisciplinary one. Doing this, the rationalist undermines the autonomy claim, proposed by many rationalists. He undermines the claim that philosophers don't have to consider the results of the empirical sciences in order to answer their philosophical questions.

5. An objection

Now one may object that my argument only gets off the ground because I have conflated to kinds of autonomy theses. I formulated the autonomy claim as the thesis that there is no need to consult the empirical sciences, no need to use the results of their investigations in order to explain *a priori* justification. The two theses I did not keep apart are:

- (AT1) There is no need to consult the empirical sciences in order to know that there is a distinct process for arriving at justified beliefs — namely rational insights.
- (AT2) There is no need to consult the empirical sciences in order to know the details of the cognitive mechanisms involved in the process of rational insight.

It seems to be pretty obvious that rationalists like Bonjour and Bealer would accept the autonomy claim in form of AT1, but not in the form of AT2. If this is true, do rationalists have to abandon AT1 in order use the consciousness analogy? Not if we distinguish the following two versions of the autonomy claim concerning consciousness:

- (ATC1) There is no need to consult the empirical sciences in order to know that there is a distinct process for arriving at justified beliefs — namely consciousness.
- (ATC2) There is no need to consult the empirical sciences in order to know the details of the cognitive mechanisms involved in the process of consciousness.

The rationalist may now argue that ATC2 is not plausible, while ATC1 is. And then there is simply no dilemma for the rationalist. He can endorse AT1 as well as ATC1. The sort of autonomy claim just mentioned can be made not only with respect to rational insights, but also with respect to consciousness. So there is the analogy we were looking for.

However, appearances are deceptive. Consider (AT1). This is not the kind of autonomy claim the rationalist needs for his account. The question is, how do we know *a priori* that there is a distinct process for arriving at justified beliefs — namely rational insights? Most probably because we know *a priori* that there are justified beliefs at which we arrived via rational insights. However, we have to be careful. What is of interest here is not that there are certain beliefs at which we arrived via rational insights, but that we are in a position to arrive at those beliefs via rational insights. So we can modify AT1 accordingly:

(AT1*) There is no need to consult the empirical sciences in order to know that we are in a position to arrive at certain justified beliefs via rational insights.

The rationalist claims that rational insights are something very familiar to all of us, in the same way as conscious states are. Unfortunately, this is not enough. He also has to claim that given the same inputs, the outputs we arrive at via rational insights do not differ in any fundamental way among different people. This is due to the fact that rationalists like BonJour or Bealer introduce the notion of rational insights by the way of appealing to paradigmatic cases in which almost all people have the same belief. Remember how BonJour cites the proposition that nothing can be simultaneously red all over and green all over, and remarks that, given our understanding of the ingredients of the proposition . . .

... I am able to see or grasp or apprehend in a seemingly direct and unmediated way that the claim in question cannot fail to be true — that the natures of redness and greenness are such as to preclude their being jointly realized. (BonJour 1998, p. 101)

Unfortunately, there is empirical evidence that given the same input, rational insights won't yield the same outputs in every case. Let me explain. Some recent investigations made by Shaun Nichols, Stephen Stich and Jonathan M. Weinberg do indicate that rational insights in philosophy are not universal and perhaps not even very wide spread (cf. Nichols et al. 2003). Nichols et al. made experiments with Chinese, Japanese and Korean students on the one side and American as

well as European students on the other side. They presented them standard epistemic thought experiments like the Gettier case in order to see whether different cultural (as well as socioeconomic and educational) groups show significantly different responses. And indeed, the results seem to suggest that. Students grown up in the western culture were much more likely than East Asia students to attribute knowledge to Gettier victims. To be sure, there are several ways in which Nichols', Stich's and Weinberg's work can be improved. So it is perhaps desirable to repeat their investigations with a greater number of subjects. However, their work indicates that the 'output' of some rational insights in philosophy differ from culture to culture and are not so wide spread as we ever thought. To be sure, their work also indicates that perhaps some insights are universal. But finding out which of our insights belong to which group is not something we can do on completely *a priori* grounds.

I think it is therefore reasonable to distinguish two different versions of the autonomy claim AT1* mentioned above. First a weak version of the claim, referring only to the group of philosophers the speaker belongs to:

(AT1*w) There is no need to consult the empirical sciences in order to know that we (*e.g. a group of western professional philosophers*) are in a position to arrive at certain justified beliefs via rational insights.

And the strong version, referring to all human beings under normal conditions:

(AT1*s) There is no need to consult the empirical sciences in order to know that we (*qua human being under normal conditions*) are in a position to arrive at certain justified beliefs via rational insights.

If the consciousness analogy is intended to have any strength, then it has to start from the strong version of the autonomy claim. Conceding this point, our dilemma comes back. In order to argue for the thesis that philosophical insights are wide spread, we have to undertake empirical investigations. And, needless to mention, that does consequently means to give up the strong version of the autonomy claim. Simultaneously, we have to settle for the weak version. However, with the weak version, the consciousness analogy does not get off the ground. And besides that, it seems to be quite obvious that this cannot be the version the rationalists is inclined to hold.

Let us take stock. The rationalist has to claim that (nearly) all of the people to which he refers to with 'we' in the autonomy claim have the same beliefs (provided they had the same inputs and the cognitive mechanism of rational insight

worked properly). Now in order to get the consciousness analogy off the ground, the rationalist also has to claim that the phenomenon of rational insights are very wide spread, that it is something very familiar to all of us. However, recent psychological investigations suggests that the strong version of the autonomy claim is false. As the work of Nichols et al. indicates, our intuitions about whether philosophers of our culture and our educational status share the beliefs concerning certain thought experiments with us, seem to be true. While passing the cultural frontiers, however, our *a priori* competence begins to fail. We have to undertake extensive psychological investigations in order to see at which beliefs people arrive if we present them with all the well known philosophical thought experiments. But undertaking empirical investigations does also mean to give up the autonomy claim.

To be sure, I think that there are many philosophical beliefs, resulting from rational insights, which are very widely shared. And the consciousness analogy is an excellent aid for convincing some skeptics about the appeal to intuitions in philosophy. But the rationalist cannot have it both ways. It won't work to refer to the consciousness analogy and simultaneously not be willing to give up the strong version autonomy claim. The rationalist has to make up his mind.²

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Resumo

Em seu livro In Defense of Pure Reason Laurence Bonjour propôs uma explicação da justificação a priori que, essencialmente, faz referência aos chamados insights racionais. Infelizmente, não é fornecida ao leitor uma resposta substancial à questão de o que exatamente sejam tais insights racionais. Além do mais, afirma-se que isso não é de modo algum uma deficiência decisiva da explicação de Bonjour da justificação a priori — pelo menos, não uma deficiência que nos devesse motivar a abandonar sua explicação. Para apoiar a essa tese, Bonjour refere-se a uma analogia entre o caso dos insights racionais e o caso da consciência. Ele indica que não abandonaríamos o uso da noção de consciência, apesar do fato de não haver hoje em dia nenhuma resposta satisfatória para a questão sobre o que seja exatamente a consciência.

Argumentarei que a analogia a que Bonjour se refere é de fato persuasiva e pode ajudá-lo, bem como a outros proponentes da explicação do insight racional, a lidar com algumas objeções importantes. Mas tomar essa analogia a sério não tem como consequência minar uma tese racionalista favorita: a alegação de autonomia. Concluo que o racionalista defronta-se com um dilema; ele simplesmente não pode ter as duas coisas.

Palavras-chave

BonJour, insights racionais, consciência, alegação de autonomia.

Notes

¹ E.g.: “All this notwithstanding, however, it also seems abundantly clear at the intuitive level at which we are so far operating that my justification for accepting the original proposition need not and in general will not appeal to such a discursive demonstration, but will instead be just as direct and immediate as in the red-green case.” (1998, p. 104)

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