

IN DEFENSE OF RATIONAL INSIGHT

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In previous work,¹ I have defended what I characterize as a moderate rationalist view of a priori justification, according to which such justification depends on *rational insight* into the truth, and indeed the necessary truth, of the relevant proposition or claim. My purpose in this paper is, first, to restate this view, clarifying it in some respects; and, second, to respond further to the main objection, or the cluster of related objections, that has been offered against it, centering around the claim that the idea of rational insight is unacceptably “obscure” or “mysterious”. The main goal is thus to better understand what rationalist a priori insight amounts to and how it is possible, not to argue against opposing views of the a priori (though a little will be said about one of these).² I will have nothing at all to say in this paper concerning views that are skeptical about the very existence of a priori justification .

I

Both in explaining the view and in the subsequent discussion, it will help to have some particular examples in mind, though there is no need for very many nor any particular virtue in novelty. Consider then the following three:

- (1) No surface can be red (all over) and green (all over) at the same time.
- (2) If some object A is taller than a second object B, and B is in turn taller than a third object C, then object A is taller than object C.
- (3) $7 + 5 = 12$

According to the moderate rationalist view in question, when I reflect on each of these three propositions, and on countless others, I am able to see or grasp in an immediate way that they could not fail to be true.

This sort of direct insight into the necessity of a proposition is what I am calling “rational insight”. From a sheerly intuitive or phenomenological standpoint, what seems to happen in the first of these cases is this. I understand the proposition in question and in particular the specific properties and relations involved in it: thus I understand or grasp (i) the properties redness and greenness, (ii) what it is for them to be features of a surface, and (iii) what it is for the presence of one of them to exclude the presence of the other in the way that the proposition in question claims. On the basis of this understanding, I am able to see that the relation of exclusion necessarily holds between these two properties and accordingly that the proposition in question is necessarily true—and so, of course, true. Thus it is the insight into necessity that is, in my view, primary, with the insight into truth being secondary and derivative.³ And something quite similar also seems to occur in relation to the other two propositions, though I will not take the space here to describe it in detail. (For reasons that will emerge, I prefer to use the term “insight”, rather than the perhaps more familiar term “intuition”, in describing the cognitive relation in question.)

Two further, closely related aspects of this sort of insight are worth highlighting. First, though the result of the insight is that I accept the proposition in question, the fundamental insight is not *merely* propositional in character: it does not involve merely the proposition, taken as a unified whole, seeming to be true or even its seeming to be necessary.⁴ What I mean by a *merely* propositional acceptance is something that might occur, for example, in a case of testimony, where on the basis of some authority that I regard as trustworthy, I come to believe that a certain proposition is true. In such a case, I obviously have to understand the propositional claim in question, which involves understanding the properties and relations involved, but I need not have and in the testimonial case would not normally have any further insight into *why* the proposition is

true, still less that it must be true (though I might of course also accept a claim of necessity on that same testimonial basis). Perhaps this sort of merely propositional acceptance also occurs in other cases, including some where a proposition somehow just seems correct on its own in a way that might be characterized as a priori. Alvin Plantinga⁵ seems to describe a priori acceptance in something like this way: a proposition just *seems* true (and indeed necessary), with a peculiar phenomenology that he finds it hard to characterize. Perhaps this is also George Bealer's view, though I am less sure about that.⁶ And various others seem to assume such a view of the a priori as a basis for criticism.⁷

Cases of this sort, where a proposition just seems true (and perhaps also necessary), but without any further accompaniment of the sort described earlier, are *not* cases of rational insight as I understand it.⁸ As in the red-green example just described, rational insight penetrates beyond or beneath the proposition as a whole to reveal just how and why the various component properties and relations and the overall structure combine in such a way that the resulting proposition has to be true. It is in this way that the insight is more than merely propositional. And something similar also happens in the other two cases listed above. Thus I do not simply accept a propositional assertion that reflects the transitivity of the taller than relation, but rather see or grasp on the basis of my understanding of that relation *why* it has to be transitive and so *why* the proposition in question has to be true. And similarly, by understanding the ingredients of the arithmetical claim in question—the numbers (or, better, numerical properties), the relation of addition, the relation of numerical equality, and the overall structure—I do not merely find myself inclined on some not further describable basis to accept that claim, but rather again see or grasp *how* and *why* those elements combine to guarantee its truth.

Here we have also the second element that I want to highlight: that the not merely

propositional aspect of a rational insight brings with it a grasp of *why* the proposition is and has to be true. It is in this way, according to the moderate rationalist view in question, that rational insight yields a clear *reason* for thinking that the resulting belief is true—even if not a reason that can be usefully formulated in a further proposition—and so a clear justification, in the epistemic sense, for accepting it.⁹

The resulting view of a priori justification is a version of rationalism in that it holds that a priori justification genuinely exists and is not to be explained, or explained away, by appeal to the idea of analyticity or to related ideas like definition (including implicit definition). By characterizing it as *moderate rationalism*, I mean to concede, as the empirical record seems to demand, that such insight—or at least what may be indiscernible from such insight at a particular point in time by the person in question—is, like any human cognitive process, fallible. (It is, however, an interesting further question, which I am unable to go into here, whether rational insight is, in a way parallel to sense perception, susceptible to mistakes which further insight of essentially the same sort may be unable to correct.)¹⁰

II

My strong suspicion is that the account that I have given of what occurs when one reflects on examples like these is one that would seem simply obvious to virtually anyone who approached them on a purely intuitive-phenomenological basis. My own view is that this account should be accepted at face value and that it constitutes an adequate, indeed an exemplary basis for justification. But others, often even while conceding its initial intuitive appeal, reject it as being somehow too obscure or too mysterious to be acceptable. I believe that there are two main aspects to this alleged mystery or obscurity. One of these, the easier to deal with briefly, focuses on the immediate, non-discursive character of the supposed insight.

While something like this aspect of the supposed obscurity seems to me to be just beneath the surface of a number of discussions, perhaps the clearest formulation comes from Paul Boghossian. In a critical discussion of my book on the a priori, Boghossian objects that

. . . 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 properties of properties.¹¹

And a bit further on in the same discussion, he elaborates as follows:

No one denies, of course, that we can *think about* properties and relations . . . and that, as a result, we can reason our way to general conclusions about them. The question is whether we can be said to have some sort of non-discursive, non-ratiocinative, insight into their natures.¹²

The suggestion here is that there is something inherently obscure or mysterious about the idea that simple reflection on properties can yield a priori justification for claims involving those properties, without any further discursive process being required.¹³ But is there a genuine objection to be found here? If it is granted, as Boghossian might *seem* in this passage to be granting, that we can think about properties and relations in the sense of genuinely having them in mind, genuinely grasping their natures, then I find it hard to see what the problem is supposed to be. If, as suggested in my earlier discussion, I am genuinely able to grasp or understand the properties redness and greenness, why should I not thereby be able to directly apprehend at least some (though perhaps not all) of their essential features and relations, such as the fact that they exclude each other from

occupying the same surface—and similarly in the other cases? Indeed, what could a genuine grasp of such properties that did not bring with it *any* insights of this sort possibly amount to? How, to shift the example, could I possibly grasp or understand the relation of being taller than *without* thereby being able to see immediately that it is necessarily transitive?

If on the other hand, Boghossian does not mean to grant that we can think about properties and relations in the sense of genuinely grasping them or having them in mind, but instead only that we can think about them in some more indirect, external way, then it is easy to see why rational insight, as I have described it, might seem inexplicable—or, more simply, just impossible. If I have no real grasp of the essential natures of the properties and relations themselves, then obviously I have no basis for any sort of insight into what might follow from those natures. Such a picture seems to me most implausible from an intuitive-phenomenological standpoint in the cases in question and in many others like them. But it would also mean that I can *reason* about such properties only in a purely external, formal way—and that only, I would suggest, if the reasoning itself can be understood as cogent on some basis other than insight of essentially the same supposedly dubious sort into its truth-preserving character (something that I very much doubt).¹⁴

The only very serious basis that I can find for insisting on this alternative, initially very implausible picture of what is involved in thinking about properties and relations derives from the second main aspect of the obscurity-mysteriousness objection, which focuses, not on how we could have non-discursive, non-ratiocinative access to the essential features of properties and relations that we genuinely apprehend, but rather on whether and how such an apprehension is itself possible: on how we could have cognitive access of this direct and immediate sort to the properties and relations themselves. It is to this issue that I now turn.

III

Before embarking on a rather extended discussion of how such access might be possible, however, I want to insist as strongly as I can that the legitimate question is only *how* and not *whether*. It is, in my view, entirely undeniable that we do directly grasp and thereby directly understand the natures of properties and relations like redness, greenness, being taller than, numerical properties, and so on. From an intuitive standpoint, this is just about as obvious as anything could be. Just how we do it and even what such access might amount to is, as we will see, much less obvious and indeed remains in some ways quite mysterious. But to deny the very existence of this sort of access simply because we do not fully understand what it amounts to or how it works or how it fits together with other things that we know or at least think we know about ourselves and the world would be very much like denying the existence of conscious awareness itself because all of these same things are true of it—which has, of course, been done. Such denials seem to me to be mere philosophical foolishness, not to be taken seriously. And a corollary of this point is that the view of rational insight offered above also cannot be reasonably rejected on this basis: its tenability depends only on the fact that we do indeed have the sort of access in question, not on whether we understand what it ultimately amounts to or how it works. Thus the following discussion, interesting and useful though it may perhaps be, is in my view ultimately a digression that is inessential to the defense of the idea of rational intuition.

But having said this, what after all can be said about our cognitive access to properties and relations? In considering this question, I will simply assume for present purposes that the properties and relations in question are to be viewed as abstract entities of a roughly Platonic sort. This is indeed the view of them that seems to me most plausible, but I am also reasonably sure that it poses the issue to be discussed in its most difficult and challenging form. How then might we have cognitive access to such entities?

Part of the answer, no doubt, is that cognitive access to various complex properties and relations can be explained as being based on access to simpler, more basic properties and relations from which the more complex ones can be understood as being somehow derived or constructed, in a way that is essentially parallel to the way in which complex *concepts* are standardly viewed as derivative from simpler, more basic ones. And in general it seems to me that the issues and alternatives that arise with regard to complex properties and relations will be reasonably parallel to those that arise for concepts and that are discussed in the burgeoning literature on that subject. But in both cases, the issue will remain of how the simpler ingredients are themselves to be accounted for: for concepts, how simple or basic concepts (or concepts of simple “features”) are to be accounted for; for properties and relations, how we have cognitive access to simple or basic properties and relations.

In relation to this last issue, the main view that is usually assumed as a target of criticism seems to be the one that can with some plausibility be read into Kurt Gödel’s rather fragmentary remarks on the issue. This is the view that such access involves, as he puts it, a “kind of perception”: a process that is strongly analogous to sense perception, though involving perceptual experiences of a quite different sort that are produced in a quite different way.¹⁵ It is a view of roughly this sort that is Benacerraf’s primary target in his famous paper “Mathematical Knowledge,”¹⁶ though he is there concerned more narrowly with abstract mathematical entities, rather than with properties and relations more generally.

About this supposedly Gödelian sort of view, I will say only that Benacerraf’s objections seem to me to be utterly decisive. Being causally inert, abstract entities cannot cause experiences or contribute to causing them in anything remotely analogous to the way

that physical objects cause sense experiences. They cannot emit signals of some sort on their own, nor is there anything in the abstract realm that is comparable to the light waves that physical objects reflect (and properties and relations would be incapable of reflecting it anyway). Any such view is thus entirely impossible. And this is one good reason, though not the only one, for eschewing the term “intuition”, which both suggests such a view and is the term actually used by Gödel. (Though I will remark in passing that it seems to me somewhat unlikely that Gödel really held a view as obviously untenable as this.)

But, I want to insist, this familiar point in no way shows that direct cognitive access to properties and relations is impossible—which, to repeat, it could not be, since it actually occurs. There is, I believe, a quite different way in which such access might occur, one that we can see to be entirely possible in the abstract, even if filling out the specific details is very difficult. The key idea is that while abstract properties and relations cannot *causally* affect minds (or anything else), they can of course do the one thing for which they are ideally suited: they can be *instantiated*, either singly or in more complicated constellations. Particular entities instantiate properties and relations, and this is still a kind of *influence*, after all, even if not causal influence: that an object instantiates a particular universal obviously influences the object’s nature, and also can influence its causal relations with other things, including minds. And minds or mental states obviously also themselves instantiate various properties and relations.

This, of course, does not yet explain how we have the sort of cognitive access to abstract properties and relations that the idea of rational insight presupposes. There is, after all, no reason to think that we automatically have this sort of cognitive access to just any property instantiated by the mind. (Philosophy of mind and also psychology would be in some ways much easier than they are if this were so!) Moreover, there are many properties and relations to which we have apparent access that cannot, it would seem, be instantiated

by the mind or by mental states in the simple way in which a red object instantiates redness or a pair of objects differing in height instantiate the relation of being taller than. Thus some more complicated account is needed. I must confess do not see any very obvious way of determining in full detail what the correct account actually is. But there are various schematic possibilities that can help to illustrate the general sort of view that seems to be required.

First, there is the familiar view to be found in Aristotle, Aquinas, and some of their successors. On this view, a person comes to have cognitive access to an abstract property like redness by instantiating (or being “informed by”) the very property redness itself, but via a different mode of instantiation from the one that is involved when an ordinary object is red: an *intentional* mode of instantiation rather than the more familiar *natural* mode. I have expressed doubts elsewhere¹⁷ as to whether we can really make good sense of a second mode of instantiation of this sort, but such a worry is more a request for further enlightenment than anything approaching a conclusive objection.

Secondly, both George Bealer and I have suggested a view according to which the mind has access to specific properties and relations by instantiating more complex universals that involve those properties and relations as components.¹⁸ Bealer’s version (in a relatively early book) involves a contrast between (i) what he calls *conditions*, which are built up from properties and relations via broadly logical relations in a way that results in something that can obtain in the world; and (ii) what he calls *thoughts*, which are built up from properties and relations via parallel, but distinct, broadly logical operations in a way that results in something that can be instantiated by minds (or mental states).¹⁹ Thus, for example, we might have the condition and the parallel thought that a red object is taller than a green object, each of which involve the properties redness and greenness together

with the taller than relation as components. And by virtue of instantiating such a thought, we would thereby have cognitive access to the proposition that this condition obtains and to the properties and relations involved. (This picture yields a nice account of the correspondence theory of truth: a *thought* is true just in case the corresponding *condition* obtains in the world.)

Both the Aristotelian view and this latter one are, in Bealer's helpful terminology, versions of *realism* as contrasted with *representationalism*, in that they hold that the very properties and relations that are features of the world are also metaphysical ingredients of properties instantiated by mental states, rather than merely being externally represented by those states. But the really crucial thesis is perhaps just a bit more general: the thesis that we are able to think about properties and relations by virtue of having mental states that are *intrinsically* or *essentially* about them. Thus a thought that redness is incompatible with greenness is intrinsically or essentially about those very properties and that very relation, and it is having a thought with this character that gives us cognitive access to those entities.²⁰

I am not suggesting either that we are in a position to judge which, if any, of these schematic views is correct, nor that any of them fully explains how cognitive access to properties and relations is possible. But they do suggest how the metaphysical gap between minds and abstract entities might be bridged without adopting an impossible view of the Gödelian sort. I would argue that since we do in fact have cognitive access to such entities, we have good reason to think that some view along these general lines is true.

It hardly needs saying, of course, that there are many in this scientifically and "naturalistically" oriented age who will find an appeal to such hardcore metaphysics both unpalatable and unhelpful. My basic response is that such views, in sharp contrast with the

Gödelian view, are in no clear way impossible or unthinkable, but instead are merely relatively unfamiliar, quite schematic—hardly unusual in philosophy—and unfashionable. I cannot find anything even remotely approaching a knockdown objection to them.

IV

But perhaps, as many would suggest, there is a better, less mysterious alternative. Perhaps both our access to abstract entities (to the extent that we have it) and a priori justification itself depend in some way instead on something that at least seems initially familiar and unproblematic: on our possession of *concepts*. The literature on concepts in general and on the bearing of concepts on a priori justification in particular is very large, and there is no space in this paper to consider very much of it. Here I will be mainly content, first, to describe a view of what it is to have a concept that is quite compatible with my account of rational insight; and then, second, to briefly compare this view with that of one of the more explicit recent proponents of the supposed conceptual alternative, asking whether there is in fact any substantive difference at this point between the two views.

The place to begin in discussing concepts is to ask just what a concept is supposed to be—or, perhaps a bit clearer, what *possessing* a concept is supposed to amount to. Though the term “concept” is fairly ubiquitous in philosophical discussions, the answers to these questions seem to me far from obvious—nor is it at all clear that different philosophers always have the same thing in mind when speaking of concepts or of possessing them. One issue that is especially unclear is whether invoking concepts is supposed to *explain* the sort of cognitive access to properties and relations that I have been discussing, or whether it is instead supposed to provide an alternative that *dispenses* with such access.

My suggestion is that possessing a concept is best explained as having a cluster of mental abilities, centering around the ability to think clearly and intelligibly about the sort of thing in question. Thus, for example, to possess the concept of red is to have the ability to

think clearly and intelligibly about the property redness (and derivatively about things that have that property). This obviously involves understanding what the property redness amounts to and what it is for things to have it. Many discussions of concepts also stress recognitional abilities, but these seem to me secondary and derivative at best: if I possess the concept of red and *in addition* have some appropriate sort of access to instances of this property, then I should be able to recognize them as such. But the second of these two elements is crucial and in no way follows from possession of the concept alone. (And of course speaking in this simple way of access to the instances glosses over a host of problems and issues.)

If this is what it is to have a concept, then the appeal to concepts is in no way incompatible with or a replacement for the direct grasp of properties and relations advocated above. To have a concept of a particular property or relation just *is* to have the ability to directly grasp or apprehend that property or relation in precisely the way that the idea of rational insight presupposes. But then talk of concepts is so far more a baptism of that ability than an explanation of it, and there is no clear room here for the suggestion that a priori justification might appeal to concepts *instead* of rational insight. And, if my earlier suggestions were correct, concept possession and the states of mind reflecting it would still require a deeper metaphysical explanation of the same general sort already discussed.²¹

Is there some other conception of concepts that might provide the basis for a clear alternative to the rationalist view? As already noted, the literature on concepts is quite large, but almost all of it seems to be focused on the question of how more complex concepts are built up from concepts of simpler “features”—whether by definition, by appeal to prototypes, or in some other way—with what amount to concepts of these “features” being

simply assumed with little or no explanation. But these “features” are, of course, just the basic or primitive properties and relations with which I am here mainly concerned, and little is usually said about how we have conceptual access to them.

Here it will be helpful to look briefly at a view of the role of concepts offered by Carrie Jenkins, who is perhaps the most explicit recent advocate of what she calls “the conceptual approach” to a priori knowledge and justification.²² In her book *Grounding Concepts*²³ (and in a number of related papers), Jenkins offers an account that focuses on arithmetical claims and the corresponding concepts, though her view, if otherwise adequate, could (as she recognizes) be easily extended to a priori knowledge in other areas. While her view is formulated in terms of knowledge rather than justification, I can see no reason why the part of her account that is most relevant to the issue about concepts cannot be viewed as an account of a priori justification, albeit one that is supplemented by further features designed to deal with the issue of knowledge, and it will simplify my discussion here to construe it in that way.

So construed, Jenkins’s view is that a priori justification results from a certain sort of *examination* of our concepts. Here are a couple of her examples:

For instance, when we attempt to conceive of a non-female vixen, we investigate whether our concept of *vixenhood* is a concept as of a property that includes the property of which our concept *female* is a concept. We find that it is and hence report that we cannot conceive of a non-female vixen When we attempt to conceive of $7 + 5$ not being equal to 12, we investigate whether our concepts of 7, 5, and 12 are concepts as of things that stand in the relation denoted by our concept $\dots + \dots = \dots$. We find that they are, and hence report that we cannot conceive of $7 + 5$ not being

equal to 12²⁴

Despite the insistence on concepts (and the initially negative formulations), it should be clear that her account of these examples is in fact strikingly similar to the account of rational insight offered above. It seems to presuppose a kind of access to the properties of being a vixen and of being female and to the property of numerical equality and to whatever entities the numerical concepts are concepts of (for example, numerical properties). On the basis of this access, we are able to determine that the properties and perhaps other entities in question stand in certain relations. The difference is the insistence that this access is achieved via the corresponding concepts, rather than in some more immediate or direct way. But without some further account of what concepts are or how they accomplish this feat, of what it is for a concept to be, as she says, “as of” something, it is hard to be sure that this account really differs in any important way from the views of property access already discussed (perhaps the concept of *red* just *is* what Bealer would call the *thought* of red)—or how if it genuinely differs, it is any less “mysterious”. (In fact, it seems pretty clear that someone like Boghossian should also object to the “non-discursive, non-ratiocinative” character of Jenkins’s examinations of concepts and of the correlative properties.²⁵)

What Jenkins has to say about concepts themselves seems to me not very helpful at this point. It is clear that she endorses, though without any very specific elaboration, the standard view that complex concepts are built in some way out of simpler, more basic ones. She also holds that concepts are sub-propositional mental representations. But as to how a basic concept relates to a property of which it is a concept, we are told only that the “as of” locution reflects the idea that information about the property is “encoded” in the concept, with no real hint as to what this “encoding” amounts to or how it is supposed to work. To her credit, she seems to recognize that concepts that can do the work that she wants them

to do cannot be viewed as merely linguistic or symbolic representations of the sort advocated by Jerry Fodor and others. To use her own example, examining the concepts *man* and *bachelor* can lead to (and justify) the belief that all bachelors are men, but no such result can be achieved merely by examining the words “bachelor” and “man”²⁶—or, I would add, representations that function anything like these words. But beyond this useful but negative point, I can find only an analogy with maps. And while it is easy to see how the idea of a map might be a useful analogy for how a complex concept works, it is hard to see how it sheds much light on simple or basic concepts: how, for example, could the basic concept *red* stand in anything like a mapping relation to the simple property of redness?

I am thus unable to see how Jenkins’s appeal to concepts as the basis for access to properties and relations, taken by itself, constitutes a clear alternative to the sort of realist view (in Bealer’s sense) discussed above. Indeed, I am sorely tempted to think that Jenkins’s account, as described so far, is really just a restatement in other language of the very same idea of rational insight advocated earlier. (I should note that Jenkins does offer what can be construed as a further objection to the view that insight of this sort is in itself a sufficient basis for a priori justification; I will look briefly at this objection in the final section of the paper.)

Approaching the issue a bit more generally, is there a defensible view of concepts that provides a genuine alternative to the position I have been advocating so far? Present in the literature with varying degrees of explicitness, and also reflected in Jenkins’s discussion, seems to be a view of concepts having the following main features:

First, concepts are mental representations of a sub-propositional sort (or perhaps the capacity to have such representations). They are thus not themselves abstract entities such as Fregean senses.

Second, having a concept allows one to think, in a meaningful, intelligible way, about that of which it is a concept. Having concepts of various properties and relations allows one to genuinely think about those properties and relations in more than an external, merely referential way. Such concepts could thus provide a basis for a kind of a priori justification. (The concepts in question are thus *not* to be understood in the way proposed by Fodor, as mere mental words in a language of thought whose content is entirely a result of external causal relations to whatever they represent.)

Third, such concepts do *not* involve the sort of grasp or apprehension of properties and relations that rational insight of the sort explained above requires. Concepts of such things relate to them in some more indirect way: they represent them but do not essentially involve them in the strong way discussed above. (Whether the connection is purely contingent, in the way that the connection between a mental word and what it represents would be, is less clear; as already noted, I do not see how it can be merely symbolic or causal.)

But though some view along these lines seems often to be taken for granted, I want to question whether we really have any clear understanding of what such concepts would amount to and how they would work. Focusing on concepts of properties and relations, the crucial point is that a concept of some property or relation must *connect* with that property or relation in some way that makes it intelligible how a person who has the concept can thereby think meaningfully *about* that property or relation—if not by grasping the property or relation itself in the way that I have tried to indicate, the way that rational insight presupposes, then in some other clear and intelligible way. This is just to say, for example, that there must be an account of what makes the concept of red indeed a concept *of red*. What is this crucial connection supposed to amount to? How is it supposed to work? Without a clearer answer to these questions than I have been able to find, the appeal to

concepts does not seem to me to constitute a clear alternative to the idea of rational insight—and certainly not one that is less “mysterious”.

V

But Jenkins also raises a further objection to the view that conceptual examination, as she understands it, is sufficient by itself for a priori justification. If correct, this objection would also seem to apply to my view of rational insight, and I want to conclude the paper by having a brief look at it. In first approximation, Jenkins’s thesis is that the mere fact that a certain claim is a result of conceptual examination in her sense (or, I would put it, of rational insight into the corresponding properties and relations) is not enough to establish that the claim is justified in a sense that means that we have good reason to think that it is true of reality.²⁷ The reason here is not that the process in question is fallible, but rather the deeper concern that the concepts on which it operates might not be accurate representations of real features of reality at all—i.e., I take it, that the properties that those concepts seem to represent or “encode” might not be genuine properties. As she puts it at one point,²⁸ the concepts in question might be mere “pseudo-concepts”; or, I suppose she might say, the seeming properties in question might be mere “pseudo-properties”.

Jenkins’s solution to this supposed problem is to impose a further, rather complicated condition for genuine a priori knowledge—and so, I take it, for a priori justification. This condition is roughly that the concepts involved, or at least the basic concepts that are their ingredients, must be, in her terminology, *grounded* in the sense of being non-accidentally accurate depictions of genuine features of reality. And this in turn requires, in her view, that the basic concepts in question must be sensitive or responsive in the right way to non-conceptual sensory input from the world. This requirement, which she construes in an externalist way as one of whose satisfaction the person whose belief is thus justified need have no awareness of any sort, makes the resulting justification and

knowledge fundamentally empirical in character, even though it still in her view counts as a priori in the sense of not being dependent on empirical *evidence*. (Though it plays a crucial epistemic role, the non-conceptual experience involved here does not function as evidence.)

I have many doubts about the details of this account, especially about the role that non-conceptual experience is supposed to play; and I am also (not surprisingly!) unhappy about the externalist character of the view. But to pursue any of these concerns would require a much longer discussion than I have room for here. For present purposes, I want to focus on the supposed problem rather than the solution: has Jenkins described a genuine problem for a view that appeals to rational insight for a priori justification (or to one that appeals to her variety of conceptual examination alone, without the further requirement that she imposes)? Do we really understand what it would be for an apparent concept to be, in her sense, a mere pseudo-concept—or for an apparent property to be a mere pseudo-property?

It is possible, of course, for our thinking to be confused or muddled in ways that result in the concepts or the corresponding properties not being clearly conceived. But this does not seem to be the sort of thing that Jenkins has in mind, nor is it clear why it would require a solution of the sort she proposes, rather than just additional, more careful consideration and reflection. It is also possible, as she mentions, that a complex concept could be constructed from unproblematic simple ingredients in a way that, as she says, “smuggles in extra content”²⁹—that is, I take it, that assumes things about the relations of the ingredients for which there is no independent justification.³⁰ But this also does not seem to be the sort of thing she has at least mainly in mind, and again would not obviously require any remedy beyond careful reflection. And she is also quite clear that a property may be a real aspect of the world in the relevant sense, and so not merely a pseudo-

property, even if it fails to be instantiated in the world—indeed even if that failure of instantiation is necessary.³¹

What then would it be for an apparent property that is clearly conceived and that is not constructed out of more basic properties in an illicit way to be nonetheless a mere pseudo-property? What, to take one of her own examples, would it be for this to be true of the supposed property *vixenhood*? Here we can imagine various fairly outlandish possibilities: Perhaps foxes are genderless and reproduce in some hitherto unsuspected way. Perhaps foxes are cleverly disguised machines. Perhaps there are no foxes at all, with the idea of a fox being merely mythological. Perhaps there are no mammals of any sort or even no animals at all. Perhaps there are no physical entities of any sort, but only ideas in the mind of God or appearances in the phenomenal world. But none of these possibilities would, I suggest, mean that the very property of *vixenhood* is not a perfectly genuine property (and the corresponding concept a perfectly legitimate concept)—only that the property in question is not instantiated, perhaps even, if one of these views is necessary, necessarily not instantiated, and we have already seen that that is not enough, on Jenkins's own view, to make the supposed property merely a pseudo-property.

I thus can find no clear idea of what it would be for the sort of conceptual examination that Jenkins describes (or the corresponding rational insight) to fail for this sort of reason to yield the priori justified belief (and, I think, also knowledge) that all vixens are female, without requiring any sort of dependence on anything empirical. What is true, of course, is that the specific *application* of this result to the world requires knowledge that vixens exist (or, more specifically, that they can be found in some particular location or area). This further knowledge can, of course, only be empirical. And something similar is true of the other examples with which I began: to apply the claim about color

incompatibility to the world, I must know empirically that there are red or green surfaces or at least that there are surfaces; to apply the claim about the transitivity of taller than to the world, I must know empirically that there are things having differing heights; and to apply the arithmetical claim to the world, I must know empirically that there are genuinely countable things in sufficient supply. This is, in my view, where empirical input comes into the picture, and I see no clear need for it to play any other role.

It may help here to look briefly at perhaps the most interesting of Jenkins's fairly sparse list of examples: the concept of Euclidean space or, more specifically, the Euclidean concept of a triangle.³² Her suggestion is that these concepts are in her sense "ungrounded" and hence that the a priori justification and knowledge that might seem to pertain to them is not genuine. But I can see no clear rationale for such a view. Even if we accept without question the received view that Euclidean geometry was refuted by the General Theory of Relativity (a view that is, I think, at least less clearly right than it is standardly taken to be³³), this does not show in any clear way that there is anything wrong with the Euclidean properties or concepts and with the a priori justification and knowledge that depends on them. What it shows, at most, is that the Euclidean properties are not in fact instantiated in our world—though they might have been in some other possible world whose nature is different from ours. Indeed, it is worth noting that some of the fairly standard views in the area seem hard to make sense of on Jenkins's account: the view that the choice between Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometries is merely a matter of convention; or the view that there is no real (that is, verifiable) difference between a view that combines non-Euclidean geometry and general relativity and one that combines Euclidean geometry with the idea of "universal forces" that result from concentrations of matter and exert distorting effects on things like light rays.

In this brief discussion, I have obviously been unable to do full justice to the richness and complexity of Jenkins's overall view. But I am unable to find there a clear and compelling objection to the conception of rational intuition advocated in this paper.

Very briefly stated, my conclusion is that the idea that rational insight is mysterious or obscure or perhaps even somehow occult has much less force than is usually ascribed to it. Assuming that we are indeed able to directly grasp or understand properties and relations, there is nothing especially puzzling about immediate, non-discursive insight into some of their necessary or essential features. And while there is no very specific account presently available of how we are able to have the mental grasp of properties and relations upon which such insight depends, it is clear both that we do often have such a grasp and that there are possible accounts of it that do not require causal relations between abstract entities and the mind. Moreover, there is no reason to think that the appeal to concepts renders these matters any clearer or less mysterious. Finally, I also suggested that Jenkins's further objection to a priori justification based merely on conceptual examination or rational insight is not compelling: while empirical input is undeniably needed to apply a priori justified claims in a specific way to the world, there is no reason to think that it is required to establish the genuineness of either the concepts or the properties that are the basis for such justification—and so no reason to think that the resulting justification is at bottom empirical in character in the way that she suggests.

NOTES

¹ Mainly in my book *In Defense of Pure Reason* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1998)—hereafter referred to as *IDPR*. See also the book symposium on *IDPR* in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 63 (2001), pp. 625-698; and my debate with Michael Devitt in Ernest Sosa & Matthias Steup (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, (Blackwell, 2005).

² I should note, however, that I also continue to believe both (a) that a robust conception of a priori justification is essential for any non-skeptical account of the justification of beliefs that go beyond immediate experience (whatever exactly that includes); and (b) that only a view of the a priori that is at least approximately along the lines indicated here can accomplish this end. But there is no room in this paper for further discussion of these matters.

³ In fact, speaking here of *necessity* is not quite accurate, at least if necessity is understood in the most standard way as truth in all possible worlds. For there are propositions involving indexicals that can be known a priori and in relation to which we have essentially the same sort of insight, but that are not necessary in this standard sense. (An example would be the proposition that if I exist and I am located somewhere, then I am here.) Such propositions hold “fixedly actually”: they hold in the actual world, no matter which world is actual (as of course do claims that are necessary in the more standard sense), even though they do not hold in every possible world. But I will neglect this refinement in the present paper. (For a useful discussion, see Christopher Peacocke, “The A Priori,” in Frank Jackson & Michael Smith (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 742-43.)

⁴ I have said previously, originally in response to an objection leveled by Paul Boghossian, that the fundamental insight is *non-propositional* in character (in the book symposium cited in note 1; see pp. 638-39 for Boghossian’s objection and pp. 675-77 for my reply). This has been misunderstood (for example by Devitt, in the debate also cited in note 1; see pp. 119-120), and the formulation in the text now seems to me a somewhat better way to put the point.

⁵ In his *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 105-6.

⁶ See, for example, George Bealer, “A Theory of the A Priori,” *Philosophical Perspectives*, vol. 13 (1999), pp. 29-55, where the a priori seems to be characterized in exclusively propositional terms.

⁷ For example, Paul Boghossian, in the discussion cited in note 4 (and elsewhere); and also Ernest Sosa, in *A Virtue Epistemology*, volume 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), chapter 3.

⁸ Some, perhaps most, cases of so-called “intuition” (as it is invoked in philosophy) seem to be of this merely propositional sort. I am inclined to think that such intuitions are not justified in any clear way without some further appeal (such as to the often-cited fact that they are independently accepted by substantial numbers of people).

⁹ And so also, if other requirements are satisfied, a priori knowledge. But I will have almost nothing to say in this paper about knowledge as opposed to justification.

¹⁰ Whether or not my view counts as “moderate” in the senses in which others, such as Christopher Peacocke and George Bealer, have used that term is less clear to me, though some of the issues discussed below are at least relevant to this question.

¹¹ Boghossian, “Inference and Insight” (his contribution to the book symposium on *IDPR*, cited in note 1), p. 635.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 635-36 (italics in original).

¹³ It seems to me that an objection in the same vicinity is the basis for Christopher Peacocke’s

criticisms of the view that he calls “minimalism” and his preference for his own view (which he calls “moderate rationalism”), with the latter demanding a further “substantive explanation” for a priori “ways of coming to know”. See Peacocke, “The Programme of Moderate Rationalism,” in Boghossian & Peacocke (eds.), *New Essays on the A Priori* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 254-85, esp. pp. 258-61. But sorting out Peacocke’s complicated view is a much larger task than I can undertake in the present paper.

¹⁴ Boghossian himself is reduced to saying—most implausibly, it seems to me—that the most fundamental logical truths or principles of inference are simply adopted and followed *blindly*, in the absence of any reason to think that they are correct (“Inference and Insight,” p. 634). (He initially ascribes this view to Wittgenstein, but it seems clear that he endorses it himself.)

¹⁵ Gödel, “What is Cantor’s Continuum Problem?”, reprinted in Paul Benacerraf & Hilary Putnam (eds.), *Philosophy of Mathematics: Selected Readings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 483-4. (It is worth noting that Gödel’s view seems to be, not that we have an immediate perception of mathematical entities, but rather that we arrive at a knowledge of them on the basis of “something else which *is* immediately given”.)

¹⁶ Reprinted in Benacerraf & Putnam, pp. 403-420.

¹⁷ *IDPR*, pp. 183-4.

¹⁸ *IDPR*, pp. 184-6; Bealer, *Quality and Concept* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), chapter 8.

¹⁹ Bealer never quite says that the relation between thoughts, in his sense, and minds or mental states is one of instantiation, but this is a very natural interpretation of his view.

²⁰ This might also allow, perhaps, for a view of the sort that might seem to be present in Husserl and some others, according to which a mental state that is about redness instantiates a universal that is entirely distinct from redness but still essentially or intrinsically related to it.

²¹ One obvious issue about concepts, thus understood, is how they are acquired: how we come to have them. I don’t know the answer to this question; and, despite the confidence with which views on this issue are sometimes expressed, I doubt very much whether anyone else does either. There are familiar possibilities: Perhaps some concepts are innate. Perhaps some concepts are acquired via abstraction from experience of their instances. But apart from other sorts of objections, it seems unlikely that either of these views or even the two in combination can handle all of the relevant cases.

²² Especially in her paper “A Priori Knowledge: the Conceptual Approach”, forthcoming in A. Cullison (ed.), *The Continuum Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Andrew Cullison, (London: Continuum Press). A version is available on her website.

²³ C. S. Jenkins, *Grounding Concepts: An Empirical Basis for Arithmetical Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Subsequent references to this book will use the abbreviation *GC*. (Since I was working with an electronic version of the book, the page references may be slightly inexact, but they should be very close.)

²⁴ *GC*, p. 123.

²⁵ And I suspect that Peacocke would object in a similar way (see footnote 13, above).

²⁶ *GC*, p. 132.

²⁷ Jenkins tends to couch this point in terms of knowledge rather than justification, but I will ignore here the complexities introduced by the concern about knowledge.

²⁸ *GC*, p. 58.

²⁹ *GC*, p. 126.

³⁰ This is, I take it, what is wrong in her example (borrowed from Dummett) of the concept *Boche* (*GC*, pp. 59-60).

³¹ *GC*, p. 126.

³² *GC*, pp. 180, 239-40.

³³ See the Appendix to *IDPR*.