

Monstrous *A Priori*

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There seem to be true identity statements with proper names as their terms that are known only *a posteriori*. Quine uses a variant of the Fregean story of the morning star and the evening star to make this point.

We may tag the planet Venus, some fine evening, with the proper name “Hesperus”. We may tag the same planet again, some day before sunrise, with the proper name “Phosphorus”. When we discover that we have tagged the same planet twice our discovery is empirical. And not because the proper names were descriptions. (Marcus 1963, p. 101)

Vis-à-vis this situation it seems to be a natural thing to say things like (1.a) and (2.a).

- 1.a We do not know *a priori* that Hesperus is Phosphorus.
- 2.a It is not knowable *a priori* that Hesperus is Phosphorus.

1.a and 2.a are also claims Saul Kripke makes in “Naming and Necessity”. This is in line with his general tenet to distinguish apriority and necessity; identities hold necessarily (if we disregard the question of their truthvalue in worlds where the individual in question does not exist) therefore sentences like 1.a and 2.a state the existence of necessary truths *a posteriori*.

But while 1.a and 2.a are initially plausible, they are in conflict with some deep-rooted theoretical assumptions. Witness the following sentences.

- 1.b We know *a priori* that Hesperus is Hesperus.
- 2.b It is knowable *a priori* that Hesperus is Hesperus.

The sentence “Hesperus = Hesperus” is trivially true. Everybody knows things like that. Hence both 1.b and 2.b above are also true. But isn’t knowledge a *propositional* attitude? Isn’t it true that the truthvalue of “we know that S”, “we know *a priori* that S”, or “it is knowable *a priori* that S” is a function of the proposition expressed by S? Now the same Kripke has taught us that the proposition expressed by “Hesperus is Hesperus” and the proposition expressed by “Hesperus is Phosphorus” are identical. Let the doctrine that the so-called propositional attitudes are functions of the said kind be called propositionalism. Taken together with 1.b and 2.b, propositionalism entails that 1.a and 2.a are both false; if we know *a priori* that Hesperus is Hesperus, we also know *a priori* that Hesperus is Phosphorus; if it is knowable *a priori* that Hesperus is Hesperus, then it is also knowable *a priori* that Hesperus is Phosphorus.

Given this conflict between *prima facie* intuitive judgement and theoretical assumption it would be desirable to inspect the alleged intuitive data in more detail. Is there any argument to the extent that 1.a or 2.a are true? – Adherence to propositionalism has re-

cently led Scott Soames (in Soames 2002) to deny the existence of *a posteriori* identities with names as terms. According to him the claim to the contrary is something Kripke has failed to argue for in a convincing way. Soames dissects a line of argument taken from “Naming and Necessity” but finds it incomplete. He argues that the gap could not be closed in a convincing way at all.

This paper is devoted to the search for an argument for the existence of *a posteriori* identities. I will try to improve on existing predecessors and defend the result against Soames’ critique.

First I will inspect Kripke’s original argument as well as Soames’ reconstruction. This reconstruction, while closely related, is shown to differ from Kripke’s original in important respects. I will then ask whether either the original or Soames reconstruction may be considered as satisfactory arguments for the existence of *a posteriori* identities. I will show that this is not the case. These arguments use objectionable notions of apriority, but this problem can be remedied. The result will still be open to Soames main criticism against Kripkean arguments, namely that they are committed to principles of disquotatation, principles of a kind that Kripke himself has later shown to be objectionable. Therefore, I will also sketch a defense of principles of disquotatation.

Kripke’s Argument

Soames claims that Kripke’s argument for the existence of *a posteriori* identities appears in the closing five pages of Lecture II of “Naming and Necessity”. This is true but misleading. Although there are one or two sentences that contain the beginnings of such an argument, Kripke’s overall argument in these pages is quite different. So, before I turn to what might be called Kripke’s argument for *a posteriori* identities, let me put the records straight.

In these five pages, Kripke tries to defend his thesis that true identity statements with proper names as their terms are necessarily true against the challenge posed by claims like 2.a. These are challenging because there seems to be a persuasive road of argument from the aposteriority of something to its contingency.

There is a strong feeling that leads one to think that, if you can’t know something by *a priori* ratiocination, then it’s got to be contingent: it might have turned out otherwise; but nevertheless I think this feeling is wrong. (Kripke 1980, p. 101)

The alleged road from aposteriority to contingency runs as follows. Suppose it cannot be known *a priori* that S. From this one might infer that it might have turned out that it’s not the case that S. This again, would entail that it might have been not the case that S and finally that it is possible that it is not the case that S.

Kripke tries to block this road. He attacks the first step. According to Kripke, if something cannot be known *a priori*, it is still not correct to say that it might have turned out otherwise.

But surely there is something to the intuition that it might have turned out otherwise. In the pages following the above quote Kripke tries to point out some ways in which what is correct of this intuition might be saved:

It might have been that at least one of the names “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus” referred to some other planet, such that the two names did not corefer.

In the story, we are in a position to say truly that it might turn out that Hesperus is Phosphorus, though not in a metaphysical sense. Our “might” would be totally epistemic and would “express [our] present state of ignorance, or uncertainty” (p.103).

Most importantly, the inventor of the names might have been in a qualitatively identical epistemic situation and have called two planets “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus”, without their being identical. We probably mean this, if we say, in a loose and inaccurate sense (cf. p. 142), that it might have turned out otherwise.

[I]t's true that given the evidence that someone has antecedent to his empirical investigation, he can be placed in a sense in exactly the same situation, that is a qualitatively identical epistemic situation, and call two heavenly bodies “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus”, without their being identical. So in that sense we can say that it might have turned out either way as to Hesperus' being Phosphorus. (*ibid.*, p. 104)

I contend that these closing five pages of Lecture II are not an easy read. But two things should have become clear by now.

First that Kripke tries to defend the idea that identity statements between names are necessarily true, if true, but not the thesis that some such statements are *a posteriori* necessities. Indeed, if it turns out there are no *a posteriori* identities Kripke ought to be delighted (as far as the general argument of “Naming and Necessity” goes)!

Second, on the whole the existence of *a posteriori* identities is taken for granted rather than argued for. (There are exceptions though, and it is to some piece of text that might be taken to constitute such an argument we will turn shortly.)

Given these two things, it is odd that Soames claims that the last five pages contain Kripke's argument for the existence of *a posteriori* identities. Luckily, an argument *is* contained in that part of the text that, according to Soames, summarises the rest, though. So let us turn now to that part. It consists of just two sentences.

So two things are true: first, that we do not know *a priori* that Hesperus is Phosphorus, and are in no position to find out the answer except empirically. Second, this is so because we could have evidence qualitatively indistinguishable from the evidence we have and determine the reference of the two names by the position of two planets in the sky, without the planets being the same. (*ibid.*)

You might think that the “so” points to a preceding extended version of the same argument. In fact, there is no such extended predecessor, and the argument comes rather as a surprise in a piece of text where the purpose is to elucidate a sense in which it could have turned out that Hesperus is not Phosphorus and show that this sense does not imply the contingency of identity. But at least in these two sentences we finally have a “because”, and thus an argument. It seems to say that we do not know *a priori* that Hesperus

rus is Phosphorus because our evidence *prior to empirical investigation* does not rule out that the sentence “Hesperus is Phosphorus” in our language is false.

Now, given a classical semantics for knowledge (say along the lines of Hintikka 1962), one could indeed conclude that we do not know that Hesperus is Phosphorus; halt, to be precise, one could conclude that we do not know that the names “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus” are coreferring. To conclude that we do not know that Hesperus is Phosphorus, one has to engage in an *act of disquotatation*. This does not necessarily mean that one has to accept a disquotational principle, like, e.g. that if an agent knows that S is true she also knows that S. But it surely means that one has to accept that such a principle delivers a correct result in the present case. Let me summarise some general features of the argument.

It is an argument for 1.a.

A priori is understood as *prior to empirical investigation*.

It relies on the principle “if A’s evidence cannot exclude the possibility that S is false, then A does not know that S is true”

plus an act of disquotatation: conclude from the fact that Quine does not know that “Hesperus is Phosphorus” is true that he does not know that Hesperus is Phosphorus.

Soames’ Reconstruction

Soames first points out that Kripke’s argument as it stands is incomplete, because it has to be supplemented with a disquotational principle. The principle he proposes is the following.

Strong Disquotatation and Justification

A sincere, reflective, rational individual *i* who understands *S* and is in possession of evidence *e* would be justified in accepting *S* on the basis of *e* iff *i*’s possession of *e*, and *i*’s reasoning correctly about it, would be enough to ensure that *i* would be justified in believing the proposition expressed by *S*, and hence that *i* satisfies *x would be justified in believing that S*. (Soames 2002, p. 9)

The principle allows (under specified circumstances) to take a person’s being justified in accepting a sentence *S* and conclude that she is justified in believing that *S*.

The details of this principle are not terribly important for the things to come, but what first meets the eye is that this principle is in terms of justification, rather than knowledge. This is a feature that is also present in Soames’ version of Kripke’s argument.

The argument comes in four steps.

(i) Since there are possible situations in which *Hesperus is Phosphorus* expresses something false, even though the agents in those situations are perfect reasoners who have evidence qualitatively identical with the evidence available to us simply on the basis of our linguistic competence, the evidence available to us simply on the basis of our linguistic competence does not justify our accepting the sentence.

(ii) So, by the strong disquotation and justification principle, the evidence available to us simply by virtue of our competence, plus our reasoning correctly about it, is not enough to justify us in believing that Hesperus is Phosphorus.

(iii) If the belief that Hesperus is Phosphorus were justifiable *a priori* then it would be justifiable by virtue of the evidence available to us by virtue of our linguistic competence, plus our reasoning correctly about it.

(iv) Thus that belief is not justifiable *a priori*. Hence, it is not knowable *a priori* that Hesperus is Phosphorus. (*ibid.*, pp. 9–10)

In (i) it is argued that we are not justified in accepting the sentence “Hesperus is Phosphorus”. (It is not perfectly clear how step (i) is intended to be understood. Why does Soames mention that the agents in the counterfactual situations have to be perfect reasoners? This makes “we would not be justified in accepting S because perfect reasoners with the same evidence would not be justified” a plausible reading. But instead I will assume that what is said here is in analogy to the Kripkean original. It is rather that we would not be justified in accepting S, because our having the evidence we have does not preclude that the sentence “Hesperus is Phosphorus” expresses something false.) In (ii) it is concluded that we are not justified in believing that Hesperus is Phosphorus. In (iii) and (iv) the argument develops from an argument about justification into an argument about knowledge and from a consideration of the single case (1.a) into an argument about knowability *a priori* (2.a). Further details do not matter.

Let me only list the most important features of the argument. Soames reconstruction and Kripke’s original bear similarities but there are notable differences as well:

It is an argument for 2.a

A priori is understood as *in virtue of “the evidence available to us in virtue of our linguistic competence”*

The argument relies on the principle “if A’s evidence cannot exclude the possibility that S is false, then A does not know that S is true”

plus the strong disquotation and justification principle.

Disquotation

Both arguments rely on some kind of disquotation and so will my own try at an argument. Now it is Soames’ main line of criticism of what he takes to be Kripke’s argument in “Naming and Necessity” to point to the fact that Kripke himself has later given reasons to doubt the overall validity of principles of disquotation. Kripke has even applied this considerations to the case at hand (see Kripke 1980, fn. 44). So let me in this section address disquotational principles.

I use the term “disquotation” rather broadly here; any principle that allows to eliminate quotation marks is a disquotational principle in this sense. So I am not restricting myself to what Kripke terms disquotational principles in Kripke (1979), namely principles that are concerned with an entailment from assent to belief. Soames’ principle of

strong disquotation and justification belongs to that latter class. Indeed I will be able to conduct the discussion in terms of principles that are considerably simpler. For reasons of perspicuity I will omit the proper means to distinguish use and mention typographically (e.g. by quotation marks).

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|------------------------------|---|
| (Disquotation) | <u><i>S</i> is true</u> <i>S</i> |
| (Belief-Disquotation) | <i>A</i> is a competent speaker of English <u><i>A</i> believes that <i>S</i> is true</u> <i>A</i> believes that <i>S</i> |
| (Justification-Disquotation) | <i>A</i> is a competent speaker of English <u><i>A</i> would be justified in believing that <i>S</i> is true</u> <i>A</i> would be justified in believing that <i>S</i> |
| (Knowledge-Disquotation) | <i>A</i> is a competent speaker of English <u><i>A</i> knows that <i>S</i> is true</u> <i>A</i> knows that <i>S</i> |

How do these principles relate to the discussion above? Although the principle of Justification-Disquotation is not put in terms of acceptance or assent, it is closely related to one direction of Soames' principle. And as I have said above, Knowledge-Disquotation would be a principle that could be used to complete Kripke's argument. Given a definition of knowledge as justified true belief, Knowledge-Disquotation could be shown to follow from the other principles (and that is the only reason why I have included Disquotation, that is not plagued with the problem I will discuss shortly.)

Now let us turn to Soames' critique. Soames' critique is, in a nutshell, that principles of disquotation like the last three ones seem to fail in certain cases. In "A Puzzle about Belief" Kripke imagines a Frenchman, Pierre, who acquires the belief that the French sentence "Londres est jolie" is true. Hence, by a principle for French analogous to Belief-Disquotation we are allowed to conclude "Pierre croit que Londres est jolie" which is correctly translated into English as "Pierre believes that London is pretty". Now later Pierre moves to England and comes to live in an ugly part of London. He learns English and learns that the city he lives in is called "London". But he fails to notice that this is the same city as the city called "Londres" in French. Because he lives in an ugly part of London which he does never leave he comes to believe that the sentence "London is ugly" is true. Since he is now a competent speaker of English, we might conclude by Belief-Disquotation that he believes that London is ugly. But should we, given what we know about what he used to believe about London, when he was in France? Did he change beliefs? Did he acquire contradictory beliefs? Or does he believe nothing at all now? – This is Kripke's puzzle about belief.

What does the puzzle mean for the Kripkean arguments for the existence of *a posteriori* necessity? Very little. While Kripke's puzzle presents a case where our usual practice of disquotation does not seem to be appropriate, the puzzle should not be taken to discredit every act of disquotation in attitudinal contexts. It should not even be taken to discredit all the disquotational principles. Pierre cases do not affect all of our above disquotational principles in the same way. E.g. Knowledge-Disquotation seems to be rather immune to Pierre examples. An agent cannot both know that "Londres est jolie" is true *and* know that "London is ugly" is true. And notice that Kripke does not claim that disquotational principles are entirely mistaken. He only claims to have found an example where "our usual apparatus for the ascription of belief is put under greatest strain and may even break down" (Kripke 1979, p. 136). Maybe the cases we deal with are simply cases in which our usual apparatus does not break down. Now Robert Stalnaker has argued in Stalnaker (1988) that Pierre cases require special contexts. Pierre cases are cases of contexts that are such that we don't know what to say.

It is important to understand that they are cases of linguistic indeterminacy, not of worldly indeterminacy. The facts do not leave it open what Pierre believes, rather the case of Pierre has been told us in a way such that we don't know what to say.

To me, Pierre's case is a good illustration of how much story-telling is needed for the creation of such special contexts. If a case is only described in terms of an agent's believing that one particular sentence is true, then there seems to me to be no danger of a breakdown of our disquotational practices.¹ If, e.g., we are simply told that a certain competent speaker believes that the sentence "Hesperus is *not* Phosphorus" is true, then we tend to report this by saying that this speaker believes that Hesperus is not Phosphorus. There is no linguistic indecision in such a case. Of course an enemy of disquotational principles could argue that this belief report is strictly speaking false, because it imputes a contradictory belief, and that it only *conveys* the right thing (this is the strategy Soames is pursuing in such cases). But when we make ascriptions like the above we are entirely unaware of the alleged fact that our report has to be reinterpreted in order to make sense. So to say the case is one of pragmatic reinterpretation would make this case very different from other known cases of that phenomenon.

Notions of Apriority

While I think that Kripke's original argument and even Soames' reconstruction could thus be defended, I think both arguments are open to another kind of criticism. Do they really show what they purport to show? – If you want to argue that something is not *a priori*, the argument should be based on a sensible notion of the *a priori*. Are the notions used in the above arguments o.k.? I don't think so.

¹ It would be nice to have a theory of belief ascription that predicts that. Unfortunately not even Stalnaker's theory, as I understand it, has this effect. For a try at a semantics for belief that validates Belief-Disquotation, see Kupffer (2002).

In both cases we are faced with a positive account of the *a priori*. I.e. independence of experience is understood as dependence on something non-experiential. In both cases this something is a piece of allegedly non-experiential evidence. In Kripke's case this evidence is the evidence available to us before making empirical investigations about Phosphorus. In Soames' case it is the evidence available to us simply in virtue of being a competent user of the embedded sentence, i.e. "Hesperus is Phosphorus".

The problem is that the evidence the authors are talking about is experiential, nevertheless. This tends to make things *a priori* that are really known on the basis of experience.

E.g. the evidence we have in the story before empirical investigations is already empirical evidence. It is part of this evidence that we have pointed to a certain heavenly body and called it "Hesperus", e.g. If we were to ask whether it is knowable *a priori* that someone has pointed at Hesperus, then, the answer would be yes, because we know this before empirical investigation and hence *a priori* in the sense at work in Kripke's argument. But it is surely empirical that we have pointed at Hesperus, it is even empirical at the very moment of that baptism that the heavenly body we are pointing to while calling it "Hesperus" is Hesperus.

I conclude that the notion of evidence available prior to empirical investigation does not lead very far in an explication of the notion of independence of any experience.

The case of Soames' notion is somewhat more complex. "The evidence we possess solely in virtue of our linguistic competence", what does that precisely mean on the first hand?

Is it the evidence we possess solely in virtue of being competent users of the sentence "Hesperus is Phosphorus"? To say there is such an evidence would presuppose that every possible competent user of this sentence possesses the same evidence. My T-Shirt is colourful in virtue of being red with large areas of green and yellow. That is: every possible red T-Shirt with large areas of green and yellow is colourful. Likewise if we possess a certain evidence *e* in virtue of being a competent user of "Hesperus is Phosphorus", then every possible user of that sentence possesses *e*. But there is no such evidence *e* common to every competent user. There are many possible ways experience leads to competence.

So maybe Soames intends the evidence we possess in virtue of our specific kind of linguistic competence. This is a kind of evidence that is possessed by every possible individual *A* for which two things hold. First *A* is a competent user of "Hesperus is Phosphorus" and second, the way that competence is implemented in our case and the case of *A* has precisely the same form. Perhaps then, Soames had better say that he is looking for the evidence that forms the basis of our being competent, rather than the evidence we have in virtue of being competent. Anyway, if we take that line, again, it seems to be part of that evidence that the agent has pointed to a certain heavenly body and called it "Hesperus", and precisely the same problems appear as with Kripke's notion above. (That is not to say that to slice a person's overall evidence into logical segments does not present an improvement on cutting it into temporal segments only.)

Summing up, the notion of apriority at work in Kripke's and Soames' version of the argument is not satisfactory. It is either too weak (admits too much apriority) or not applicable at all. The main problem seems to be the notion of purely linguistic evidence which is presupposed in these accounts. There is no purely linguistic evidence. But there may well be a sensible notion of justification in virtue of linguistic competence.

Yet Another Argument

The problem is that both writers focus on *specific* evidence. So why not abstract away from specific evidence? Let us say we know *a priori* that S iff we know that S simply by virtue of *being* competent (and regardless of the way that competence may be implemented). Then *a priori* knowledge will be knowledge we share with every possible competent speaker of some sentence. The fact that Hesperus has been *pointed* to would then disappear from the realm of what is predicted to be *a priori*. This is so because not every possible competent user knows that Hesperus has been pointed to. Some are involved in the baptism, others only pick up the name and do not know the specific way the name has been introduced.

In Kupffer (2002) I have tried to make this precise. There I put it in terms of an admittedly idealised notion of knowledge, though. In order to make my account here more similar to Soames' let me rephrase it in terms of justification. The notion will be one of *virtual* justification. *A* would be justified in believing that *S* exactly if it holds that if *A* had an occurrent belief that *S*, then *A* would be justified in believing so. Now we are considering which virtual justifications we possess simply in virtue of being competent.

(*A Priori* Justification) *A* would be justified *a priori* in believing that *S* if, and only if,

- (i) *A* is a competent user of *S* and
- (ii) every possible individual who knows the meaning of *S* would also be justified in believing that *S*.

A priori knowledge, then, is knowledge plus *a priori* justification.

(*A Priori* Knowledge) *A* knows *a priori* that *S* iff *S*, *A* believes that *S*, and *A* is justified *a priori* in believing that *S*.

Additionally, I will employ the principle of Justification-Disquotation, see above. Equipped with these definitions I am finally able to decide questions of apriority.

Let us first consider 1.b. and 2.b. We know *a priori* that Hesperus is Hesperus (and therefore it is knowable *a priori* that Hesperus is Hesperus) because Hesperus is Hesperus, we believe that Hesperus is Hesperus, and we would be justified *a priori* in believing that Hesperus is Hesperus. The latter is true because (i) we are competent users of the sentence "Hesperus is Hesperus", and (ii) every competent user of that sentence would be

justified in believing that the sentence is true. Therefore, by Justification-Disquotation, every competent speaker of that sentence would be justified in believing that Hesperus is Hesperus.

Now let us finally turn to 1.a. and 2.a. We do not know *a priori* that Hesperus is Phosphorus and indeed no possible competent speaker does because clause (ii) of the definition of *a priori* justification is not met.

Specifically, there may be a competent speaker, let her be called Jones, of “Hesperus is Phosphorus” with the following characteristics. Jones has made empirical investigations. On the basis of the best current theory available to her, she cannot but conclude that the sentence “Hesperus is Phosphorus” is false. Because of that she is justified in believing that “Hesperus is not Phosphorus” is true, by Justification-Disquotation we may conclude that she is justified in believing that Hesperus is not Phosphorus. But she could not be justified in believing that Hesperus is Phosphorus at the same time, therefore she would not be justified in believing so.

Conclusion

In this paper I have improved on Kripke’s argument for the existence of *a posteriori* identities with names as terms (and on Soames reconstruction of it) by supplying a better notion of the *a priori*. Furthermore I have defended the use of disquotations in all of the arguments, including my own. The result is an argument to the extent that propositionalism is false at least in the case of knowledge (or knowability) *a priori*. To the propositionalist, apriority may then appear monstrous.²

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² David Kaplan defines a “monster” to be any function that, in some context of use, distinguishes between arguments that have the same intensions.

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