

CARTESIANISM, NEO-REIDIANISM, AND THE A PRIORI: REPLY TO PUST

Gregory STOUTENBURG

ABSTRACT: Joel Pust has recently challenged the Thomas Reid-inspired argument against the reliability of the a priori defended by Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, William Alston, and Michael Bergmann. The Reidian argument alleges that the Cartesian insistence on the primacy of a priori rationality and subjective sensory experience as the foundations of epistemic justification is unwarranted because the same kind of global skeptical scenario that Cartesians recognize as challenging the legitimacy of perceptual beliefs about the external world also undermine the reliability of a priori rationality. In reply, Pust contends that some a priori propositions are beyond doubt and that fact can be used to support the overall reliability of reason. This paper challenges Pust's argument. I argue that while Pust successfully undermines a radical skeptical view of reason, he does not refute a more modest skepticism. I conclude with some suggestions for Cartesian a priorists.

KEYWORDS: a priori, skepticism, reformed epistemology, René Descartes,
Thomas Reid

Joel Pust has recently argued for the reliability of a priori intuition against an argument that attempts to show that reason is to be trusted no more than sensory experience.¹ The anti-rationalist argument goes wrong, Pust thinks, by attempting to undermine the reliability of reason by thinking of the deliverances of reason under a description (e.g. as *beliefs produced by reason*) rather than thinking of them directly (e.g. $2+2=4$). While I think Pust succeeds in showing that the skeptical argument against the a priori is insufficient to induce doubt in *all* a priori propositions, his defense of the reliability of reason only succeeds for a small, privileged class of a priori propositions. Therefore, while Pust successfully undermines a *radical* skeptical view of reason, he does not refute a more modest skeptical view.

Descartes' familiar Dream Argument against the reliability of sensory experience goes something like this. If I were asleep, I could have just the same sensations as I would have if I were awake. But if the same sensations could occur whether I was asleep or awake, then I have no way of telling whether or not my sensations are veridical. If I can't tell whether my sensations are veridical or not,

¹ Joel Pust, "Skepticism, Reason, and Reidianism," in *The a Priori in Philosophy*, eds. Albert Casullo and Joshua C. Thurow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

then I cannot know anything about the external world on the basis of those sensations. Therefore, I cannot know anything about the external world on the basis of sensation.

A key assumption of the argument is that one could be radically deceived such that when one forms a belief on the basis of a kind of experience, that belief could be false while one is unable to tell ‘from the inside.’ In the Dream Argument, the radical deception possibility is that one might be dreaming. In Descartes’ later, more severe Evil Demon argument, the radical deception possibility is that one might be subject to the machinations of a very powerful deceiver whose goal is to thwart one’s attempts to arrive at true beliefs, whether by the senses or through the exercise of reason.

The kind of skeptical argument motivated by contemporary Reidians – Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, William Alston, and Michael Bergmann – makes use of the skeptical concern that appears in the Evil Demon argument.² The meditator/Descartes wonders whether it is possible for a deceiver to cause massive confusion that obscures the truth of even very simple claims of reason. If we can imagine seeming to correctly perform simple inferences while unbeknownst to us some deceiver is at work causing us to falsely believe our inferences are good, then we have reason to doubt the reliability of our faculty of reason. Due to the possibility of sensory deception, Cartesians treat reason as foundational, but not sensation. But Reidians are puzzled: if just the same type of skeptical worry—namely, the possibility of global deception – suffices to undermine the reliability of sensory experience, it should also undermine the reliability of reason. Reidians thus accuse Cartesians of unjustifiably privileging reason over perception.

Pust argues that, contrary to appearances, the cases are not alike.³ Here is his key move. Pust argues that when we entertain doubts about the reliability of reason, we are thinking of the deliverances of reason *indirectly* rather than directly. Skeptical concerns raised indirectly do not actually concern the probable truth of claims of reason considered directly.⁴

An example can illustrate this claim. I can entertain the proposition *red is a color* in multiple ways. To entertain the proposition directly is just to think *red is*

² Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988); William Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," in *Faith and Rationality*, eds. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Michael Bergmann, *Justification without Awareness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³ Pust, "Skepticism," 214.

⁴ Pust, "Skepticism," 217.

a color. Suppose a moment after thinking *red is a color* directly, I am briefly distracted. Now I can think of that same proposition under a different description: *the proposition I was thinking about before I got distracted*. The latter thought is an indirect way of entertaining the proposition *red is a color*.

Pust puts the direct/indirect distinction to work as follows. When we wonder whether *the class* of propositions justifiable a priori might be subject to massive skeptical error, we are thinking of them *under a description* that picks out the propositions by way of the group in which they are members. When thought of in that way, putatively a priori propositions are thought of indirectly. That way of thinking is in contrast to thinking of a priori propositions directly: e.g. thinking to oneself $2+2=4$, or *whatever thinks exists*, or *nothing is both entirely green and entirely red*, etc. Pust argues that skeptical concerns raised against the a priori indirectly are bogus: I am not *really* considering whether I might be mistaken about simple a priori propositions if I ask myself whether I can imagine being mistaken about *whatever it is* that I might call ‘a priori.’ Rather, I need to consider a priori propositions directly.⁵ But when I directly consider a proposition like $2+2=4$, the clear grasp I have of its truth renders idle any skeptical challenge aimed at undermining the faculty responsible for my clear grasp of the proposition.

While Pust avoids overtly Cartesian terminology, let us call ‘clear and distinct’ a proposition the truth of which is guaranteed to one while one is considering the proposition *directly*.⁶ Pust’s argument is basically that the existence of clear and distinct propositions refutes any attempt to argue *indirectly* against the general reliability of reason.

Granting Pust’s premises, there is still a serious skeptical concern with the a priori: the fact that *some* propositions are clear and distinct provides no reason to think the deliverances of reason are *generally* likely to be true. To defend the general reliability of reason would require an argument showing that the source of clarity and distinctness is reliable because it produces clarity and distinctness in just some cases. But the fact that clear and distinct propositions are individually guaranteed to be true does little to support the overall reliability of the faculty that provides a clear and distinct grasp of those propositions when the propositions in question are not *themselves* clear and distinct.

⁵ Pust, “Skepticism,” 217.

⁶ Throughout I write of clear and distinct propositions. That is shorthand for ‘clear and distinct perception of the truth of a proposition.’ I trust that the substitution does not create confusion. I also ignore the possibility of holding that clear and distinct propositions are highly likely to be true though not so likely as to be guaranteed. Such a lesser epistemic status for clear and distinct propositions is compatible with what I say throughout.

According to the Cartesian view that interests us, the *only* feature that guarantees the truth of some a priori propositions is their clarity and distinctness. A defender of the a priori might attempt to defend the general reliability of reason by identifying some other property – perhaps *being a belief produced by reason* – as the one that makes a priori beliefs likely to be true. The argument needed here would establish the reliability of reason *directly*. But how? It is surely not clear and distinct that beliefs produced by reason are likely to be true. Even Descartes did not pursue that line of argument. (Notably, it was at just this point in the Meditations that he called in God to secure the general reliability of reason.) It is at least unclear how a direct argument for the general reliability of reason would go. (I think it's hopeless.) In any case, that is not Pust's argument.

The *indirect* skeptical worry reappears with respect to the class of a priori propositions that are not clear and distinct: surely we can imagine that although *some* a priori propositions are true, many or *most* a priori propositions are false. One cannot acquire in Pust's way any reason for thinking that other propositions which are given to one by reason are likely to be true on account of their etiology when those propositions are not clear and distinct upon direct examination. That problem is all that moderate skeptics about the a priori, including the Reidians, need to defend their skepticism against Pust.

Even in the face of this moderate skepticism, though, Pust and Cartesians can continue to claim that reason is better suited to play a foundational role than sensory experience. Reason offers propositions whose excellent epistemic credentials are transparent. Sensory experience does not. While the same sort of argument that undermines the reliability of sensory experience also challenges the reliability of reason, reason offers a safe haven in the form of clear and distinct propositions. A priori propositions capable of serving as foundations for knowledge, then, are not just whatever propositions are the product of reason, but propositions that are clear and distinct upon *direct* consideration.

As a result, Cartesians do not *need* to argue for the general reliability of the a priori. The only reliability claim about the a priori Cartesians have to defend is that *clear and distinct* propositions are guaranteed to be true. The same considerations Pust uses to undermine indirect a priori skepticism also show that one need not attempt a *general* (indirect!) defense of reason. It is enough to rely upon propositions that are clear and distinct.

A skeptical concern arises: relying exclusively on clear and distinct foundations cannot sustain what we ordinarily think is the extent of our a priori knowledge. I have two replies. First, the epistemologist's primary task is to discover the epistemic standards we hold. If our deepest epistemic standards

suggest that we have less knowledge than we ordinarily think, then so be it.⁷ Second, one *might* argue that less alleged knowledge is threatened than first appears. One might extend the privileged class of propositions that are *now* considered clear and distinct to include those one believes and for which one *would* easily have a clear and distinct perception of the proposition's truth if one *were* to consider the proposition. The fact that I was not having a clear and distinct perception of the truth of $2+2=4$ as I was writing this paragraph would not, on this suggested amendment, prevent $2+2=4$ from counting as a bit of foundational knowledge, because I already believe $2+2=4$ and it would again be clear and distinct to me simply upon entertaining it. According to this suggestion, the class of propositions that count as foundationally justified by reason is constrained by what one believes and by what can easily become clear and distinct for one. Thus, contrary to the Reidians' concern, we need not uncritically allow that *whatever* beliefs reason produces count as justified. But it is unclear how a subject can, by Cartesian standards, be justified in *relying* on these propositions that count as clear and distinct only as members of the expanded class. Surely one can wonder to oneself, "Couldn't my future clear and distinct beliefs be false?" If the beliefs in question are ones the subject now holds and that would easily become clear and distinct upon future reflection, then the answer to the question is "No": but that fact provides little intellectual satisfaction for the Descartes who wants to be *sure* that he will not fall into intellectual error.⁸

⁷ I defend this view as a consequence of an 'armchair' method of conceptual analysis in Gregory Stoutenburg, "Vicious Regresses, Conceptual Analysis, and Strong Awareness Internalism," *Ratio* (forthcoming 2015), doi:10.1111/rati.12087.

⁸ For helpful discussion on the central problem in this paper I thank the participants of Ali Hasan's seminar on a priori justification held in fall 2014 at the University of Iowa. That group includes (but is not limited to) Ali Hasan, Bryan Appley, Landon Elkind, Dave Redmond, Nik Maggos, and Emily Waddle. Thanks also to Brian Collins and Nik Maggos for comments on a draft.