

## From the A Priori to the Empirical

Comments to Henderson's *Concepts and how to make them talk*

**Bruno Mölder**

bruno.moelder@uni-konstanz.de

### 1. Henderson's Two-Stage Account of Philosophical Reflection

First stage: consideration of specific scenarios elicits particular judgements concerning the application of concepts. These judgements flow directly from one's conceptual competence.

Second stage: such particular judgements are taken as data for abducting a general claim. One has to abstract away certain empirical contingencies, the "noise":

- a. the mixed nature of concept's acquisition context;
- b. deep and superficial elements of concept's semantics;
- c. context effects and psychological biases in making judgements.

This process is empirical, for it starts from the empirical fact of one's judgement occurring and brings in empirical background knowledge of one's psychological contingencies. It is also a priori, since it could be accomplished in the armchair and in its initial phase it draws on one's conceptual competence. But it is only *low-grade* a priori due to the ineliminable *empirical* component.

### 2. A Dilemma for Henderson

What makes the first stage a priori and what gives the reflection its overall empirical element?

*Two different conceptions of a priori:*

I. *Etiological conception*: a proposition is a priori if one arrives at it in a certain manner. Directness and flowing from conceptual competence.

"These judgments are *defeasibly presumed* to emanate relatively straightforwardly from one's own conceptual/semantic competence—perhaps operating directly and non-empirically (when the resulting judgments are high-grade *a priori*) /.../' (p. 15).

"We may reasonably suppose that, *when* such judgments really are deliverances of conceptual competence, they are high-grade *a priori*." (p.18)

- But:
- a. directness could not matter
  - b. differs from the traditional account, which is justificatory.

II. *Justificatory conception*: a claim is a priori if there is a priori justification available to this claim.

If the justification of judgement at the second stage is empirical, then the first stage is a priori in the etiological sense.

*What gives the philosophical reflection its empirical complexion?* Two reasons:

- a. the second stage proceeds from the empirical fact of the occurrence of first-order judgement;
- b. the acceptance and generalisation of the deliverance of the first stage has to consider certain empirical contingencies about human psychology.

A. What matters is the *content* of one's first-order thought, not the fact of the thought occurring. Otherwise, any second-order thought would be empirical

B. Undifferentiated notion of empirical.

Distinction between *having access to the justification* and the *justification*. Playing a role in coming empirically to a judgement versus judgement having empirical content.

"the truth of these conceptually-grounded necessary claims can be appreciated without looking to acquire data about whether the world is as there represented." (p.17)

*A dilemma:*

1. Allow that the consideration of empirical contingencies plays a *justificatory* role. Then your notion of justification does not differentiate between justifying content and ways of coming to a justification. In that case what makes the judgement a priori is its *etiology* and this is quite revisionary. (*a priori etiology combined with empirical justification*.)

2. Work with the differentiated notion of justification and claim that the consideration of empirical contingencies plays only the *etiological* role in coming to a judgement. Then there is still a proper a priori *justification* available to the content of the judgement. Given the justificatory account of the a priori, it is all that matters. (*empirical etiology combined with a priori justification*.)

One has to choose - a judgement could not be both a priori and empirical in the etiological sense and it could not be both a priori and empirical in the justificatory sense.