

BOOK REVIEW - I

Bonjour, Laurence : *IN DEFENSE OF PURE REASON*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. xiv + 232.

The Book '*In Defense of Pure Reason*' by Laurence Bonjour, is concerned with the ability of human mind to acquire beliefs and knowledge about the world on the basis of rational insight without any dependence on sensory experience. Bonjour provocatively reopens the debate between rationalism and empiricism regarding the origin and justification of knowledge and presents a very strong defense of the rationalist view that *a priori* insight is a genuine basis for knowledge.

Along with this he offers a sustained critique of empiricist theories of both kinds - viz. Radical and moderate. The book offers an elucidation of a revised or more correctly a moderate version of rationalism and concludes with a rationalist solution to the classical problem of induction. The same order of discussion will be followed while giving the expository account of the book. It will be then followed by some critical remarks.

The author starts his discussion with mentioning the traditionally established concept of knowledge. In order for a person's belief to constitute knowledge, it is necessary that it be justified. Moreover the justifying reason must be epistemic, i.e. it should enhance the chance that the belief is true.

The author mentions two kinds of epistemic justification, viz. *a priori* and *a posteriori* and emphatically opines that the contemporary tendency to repudiate an *a priori* justification is apparently tantamount to the repudiation of reasoning in general which would ultimately lead to intellectual

suicide.

Before going into the details of the nature of *a priori* and *a posteriori* justifications, the author explicates the concept of "experience". According to him the relevant notion of experience should be understood to include any sort of process that is perceptual in the broad sense of - a) being a casually conditioned response to particular contingent features of the world, and b) yielding doxastic states that have as their content putative information concerning contingent features of the actual world¹.

Thus, sensory experience, introspection, memory, clairvoyance, telepathy and many others of the same type would count as varieties of experience, and the justification derived from them would be '*a posteriori*'.

In contrast to this a proposition 'p' is justified *a priori*, if and only if, a person has a reason for thinking 'p' to be true that does not depend on any positive appeal to experience or other causally mediated quasiperceptual contact with contingent features of the world, but only on pure thought or reason even if the person's ability to understand 'p' in question derives from experience².

Understood in this way, the *a priori* - *a posteriori* distinction is closely connected with necessary - contingent distinction. The former is epistemological distinction having to do with the way in which a claim or assertion is epistemologically justified. The latter is metaphysical distinction having to do with the status of a proposition in relation to the ways the world might have been.

The author tries to show that these two distinctions, though related in important ways are quite distinct in both meaning and application. This contention is much important while articulating a moderate version of rationalism.

As author's discussion is more concerned with *a priori* justification, he tries to find out what the source of this justification is.

According to a strong version of rationalism, *a priori* justification occurs when the mind directly or intuitively grasps or apprehends a necessary

fact about the nature and structure of reality. Moreover, such justification not only involves no positive appeal to experience but also is incapable of being refuted or even undermined by experience to any degree.

Hume was the first to repudiate the rationalist capacity for insight into necessary truths pertaining to reality, insisting that *a priori* justification concerns only, 'relations of our ideas' as opposed to 'matters of fact'. The underlying motivation for empiricist doubts is a deep - seated skepticism about the supposed capacity for rational insight into necessity to which the rationalist appeals.

The moderate empiricist position on *a priori* knowledge holds that while such knowledge genuinely exists and has occasional importance in its own distinctive way, it is nonetheless analytic in character; i.e. merely a product of human concepts, meanings, definitions or linguistic conventions. Such knowledge thus says nothing substantive about the world, and its justification can be accounted for without appealing to rational insight.

The author devotes whole chapter in examining this position and points out that the moderate empiricists conflate the three destinations, viz. analytic - synthetic, necessary - contingent and *a priori* - *a posteriori* which is not correct. Moreover, these philosophers do not say from where the empiricist justification for analytic propositions arrives. The author raises a very different sort of issue, the issue of the epistemological status of the empiricism itself³.

Moderate Empiricism claims that all *a priori* knowable propositions are analytic. It is plain that this thesis cannot be regarded as empirical claim. So it must apparently be justified *a priori* and the obvious question is whether it is itself analytic or synthetic. If empiricism is not to be self - refuting, the thesis in question cannot be synthetic, but has to be analytic. But the author questions whether such claim could be held with any plausibility with any sense of analyticity that has turned out to have very mild and negligible epistemological value. What the empiricist should do is to go through an attempt to make it possible for his claim to be both

knowable and true. The author's conclusion is that this feat cannot be accomplished and hence moderate empiricism is ultimately incoherent in the sense that any apparently adequate justification of its central thesis would be at the same time a putative counter-example to that thesis.

The author also examines the radical empiricist position on *a priori* which altogether dispenses with this type of justification and tries to show that radical empiricism ends in a total skepticism.

He devotes one full chapter (Ch.3) to a critical examination of Radical Empiricism held by Quine in recent times. The author recognizes that the refutation of Quine's views which have attained respectability amongst scholars places himself in a 'dialectically difficult situation'. He therefore chooses to examine in detail Quine's famous arguments against the *a priori*. Considering the "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", Bonjour holds that "it offers no compelling argument for the thesis that all conceptions of analyticity are unintelligible; the Fregean conception in particular seems to survive unscathed." (pp. 72-73) and that this portion of the Essay makes no mention of '*a priori justification*'. It's only last two sections of that Essay that make the claim that "no statement is immune to revision". But even this position of Quine is debatable and lacks the force of conclusiveness as an argument against *a priori* justification. Bonjour also examines Quine's argument from indeterminacy of translation and unravels its basic appeal to behaviorism and verificationism and ultimately to "naturalism" that lurks behind them. Bonjour thus leads us to the last resort of Quine viz; "Epistemology Naturalized", but contends strongly that "the human predicament" which Quine graphically describes in that essay is "extremely unsatisfactory and implausible from both theoretical and a practical standpoint". (p. 86) Finally, Bonjour may be said to have shown that Quine's claim that the naturalized epistemology is in principle adequate to deal with the challenge of skepticism is unfounded. Skepticism is an unavoidable consequence of Radical Empiricism.

Thus Bonjour tries to show that the Empiricist position on *a priori* justification and knowledge is epistemologically a dead end.

After showing the failure of empiricism Bonjour puts forward a version of epistemological rationalism which accepts *a priori* justification as a genuine and autonomous source of epistemic justification and knowledge. This version of rationalism rejects the traditional claim that *a priori* insight is infallible, but at the same time preserves its status as a fundamental source of epistemic justification.

In the opinion of the author, a rationalist conception of *a priori* justification is important and essential for dealing with majority of the philosophical problems. Philosophy itself is *a priori* if it has any intellectual standing at all.

The author first presents an initial formulation of the moderate rationalism from intuitive standpoint. When a person carefully and reflectively considers a proposition in question, he is able simply to see, or grasp, or apprehend that the proposition is necessary, that it must be true in all possible situations. This rational insight does not seem to depend upon any particular sort of criterion or any further discursive process.

The occurrence of such an insight does depend on a correct understanding of the claim in question which requires an adequate apprehension of the various properties and relations involved. This may itself depend on having had experience of some specific sort. But once the requisite understanding is achieved, the insight in question does not seem to depend on experience in any further way.

Such an apparent rational insight purports to be nothing less than a direct insight into the necessary character of reality. Such a rational, *a priori* insight seems to provide an entirely adequate epistemic justification for believing the proposition in question.

The author holds that a claim of infallibility of rational insight, which is asserted by the overwhelming majority of the proponents of rationalism, is false and completely indefensible. The claims in mathematics and logic, various alleged claims of rationalist metaphysicians, the routine errors in calculation are the three counter examples which the author provides to

show that it is quite possible for a proposition that seems necessary and self-evident to turn out nonetheless to be false. The implication of this is that the rationalist view considered so far must be modified in a major way.

A moderate rationalism should abandon the indefensible claim of infallibility and hold that an apparent rational insight provides the basis for *a priori* epistemic justification, which like all others, will be fallible. Though fallible, an apparent rational insight still yields a reason for thinking the proposition to be true on two conditions - that insight must be considered with a reasonable degree of care and that insight must involve a genuine awareness of the apparent necessity of the proposition. An instance that fails to satisfy these requirements will not even count as an apparent rational insight.

Author says, fallibility appears to be an unavoidable aspect of human condition in all areas of cognition, and hence should not be accepted as a reason to rule out *a priori* justification.

If rational insight is fallible, it can be corrected either by an appeal to further reflection or by an appeal to coherence.

The author considers the question whether *a priori* justification is capable of being negatively undermined or overridden by unfavorable experience. He holds that in selecting one from the two conflicting *a priori* claims, experience serves only to create a conflict, does not play any role in solving it.

After presenting a moderate version of rationalism, the author discusses the possible objections of two kinds, viz. epistemological and metaphysical, which can be raised against this view.

1. The central focus of the first kind of objection is on the very idea of rational insight, the essentially non-discursive, immediate character of rational insight. How can a supposed insight count as rational when it is arrived at on the basis of no intelligible

process or objective criterion, no reason that is independently storable, but seemingly amounts merely to a brute subjective conviction? It is criticized that the appeal to such an immediate and not further articulable insight is essentially foreign to the very idea of rationality. The objection can be however responded by claiming that the application of any sort of criterion or the employment of any discursive process must ultimately rely on immediate insight. Any criterion or rule itself requires justification and an eventual appeal to immediate insight is the only recourse if one wants to avoid an infinite regress. Secondly, criteria and rules do not apply themselves; they need to be judged and intellectually seen to apply or not to apply, and this judging can appeal only to the very same sort of rational insight.

If cogent, the present objection would impugn all varieties of reasoning or non-observational judgement, including those that lie behind the very objection itself. A general skepticism about direct or immediate insight cannot be grounded on the contrast between such insight and an insight derived at by some intellectual or discursive process.

2. It may be further objected that the moderate rationalist conception of *a priori* justification incorporates insufficient safeguards against the dangers of bias and dogmatism. What is there to prevent any person who is emotionally biased or intellectually dogmatic from regarding a claim that seems subjectively compelling to him as a product of such insight?

The author rules out the possibility of an independent criterion for the absence or presence of the bias for two reasons -

- a. The justification and application of this criterion would have to involve *a priori* insights of the same sort that raise the

concern about bias;

- b. The appeal to the same criterion to resolve these new problems would be both circular and viciously regressive. The author favours internal correctibility, the possibility that the biased apparent insight can be recognized as such via further reflection and appropriately corrected. He thinks that coherence can also play an important role though it clearly does not provide a general solution.

Thus the author holds that the mere possibility of bias should not be taken to impugn all claims of *a priori* insight, any more than the possibility of biased perception impugns all perceptual claims.

3. It is seemingly undeniable fact that there might be disparities among the claims by two persons based on apparent rational insights. Such situations, though unsatisfactory from epistemological viewpoint, are quite uncommon as author comments. He thinks that mere possibility of such cases shows that rational insights cannot be regarded as infallible and would constitute a decisive objection against strong rationalism. But the author holds that it does not provide a clear basis for an objection against a moderate form of rationalism.
4. Another objection challenges the moderate rationalism to offer a meta-justification for thinking that accepting beliefs on the basis of apparent rational beliefs is likely to lead to believing the truth.

But author holds the contention that each instance of apparent rational insight should be construed as epistemologically autonomous, as dependent on nothing beyond itself for its justification. So, the demand for meta-justification is illegitimate⁴.

Author's conclusion is that a moderate rationalism proposed here

does not face any insuperable objections of an epistemological kind.

The author argues that if skepticism about all trans-observational claims is to be avoided, moderate rationalism is highly plausible from an intuitive standpoint and faces no compelling objections of either an epistemological or metaphysical character. The author tries to strengthen this argument by an appeal to the problem of induction where the appeal to *a priori* is arguably essential.

The author chooses the problem of induction for the extended treatment because it is central to the general issue of observation-transcendent inference. And he argues that only *a priori* justification of induction has any chance of success.

A standard inductive inference would move from the premise that some quality of observed A's are those of B's to the conclusion that within some reasonable measure of approximation all qualities of A's are of B's. The problem of induction is the problem of why inference that satisfies this scheme should be expected to lead to the truth about the world.

The author discusses the Humean response to the problem but is more interested in contemporary responses.

Contemporary thinkers claim either that induction can be adequately justified in a pragmatic way by showing that it is nonetheless our best hope for finding the truth; or that the problem of induction can be dissolved by showing that the demand for a non-trivial justification of inductive reasoning ultimately makes no sense.

The first solution is suggested by Reichenbach; where he treats induction not as a form of inference but as a method of arriving at posits⁵. What we can know is that if there is a truth of this sort to be found, the method of induction will eventually find it to any degree of accuracy.

The author finds this problematic because this doesn't appear to be an epistemic justification.

The second solution is provided by Ordinary language philosophers, especially Strawson, according to which the question of whether induction is justified cannot be meaningfully raised and is a pseudoproblem. It makes sense only if it tacitly involves the demand that induction be shown to meet the standards of deductive reasoning. But this demand cannot be met. Both deduction and induction are different kinds of reasoning having their own autonomous standards.

The author criticizes that Strawson's argument in support of this view is not providing epistemic justification and equivocates the phrase 'believing in accordance with strong evidence'⁶.

According to author, both these solutions are unsuccessful in meeting the basic skeptical challenge. He examines other ways of justifying induction and finding them to be unsatisfactory, himself develops an *a priori* method of justification of induction.

The author thinks that the problem of induction arises from viewing induction as a mode of reasoning that claims to be rationally cogent i.e. one in which truth of a conclusion is at least claimed to follow in a rationally intelligible way from the truth of the premises. And this means that according to author, the connection between premises and conclusion must be intellectually visible. The author thinks that the intuitive idea behind the inductive argument is that an objective regularity of a sort that would make the conclusion of a standard inductive argument true provides the best explanation for the truth of the premises of such an argument. The author presents his own argument in support of the *a priori* justification of inductive argument and also examines the epistemological status of the same.

The main question is what is the evidence for the conclusion of the inductive argument in question. The author formulates his argument in two components.

1) It is logically possible that the conclusion in question represents the operation of nothing more than mere random coincidence but it

seems evident on a purely *a priori* basis, that it is highly unlikely that coincidence is at work and the reason is the large number of observed cases. Thus, the relevant claim of the author is that it is truth of a standard inductive premise.

2) The non-chance explanation which is needed to be given for the evidence is that the repeated observations of the same sort constitute an objective, lawful fact about the world deriving presumably from underlying casual processes of mechanism of some sort, and the observed cases reflect the objective regularity. This is the straight inductive explanation and the author presents this twofold argument as the *a priori* justification of induction.

The foregoing justification is still defeated by a feature of Hume's original argument viz. The idea that the course of nature might change. All that has been shown at best is that if standard inductive evidence obtains then it is likely *a priori* that an objective regularity of the indicated sort existed in the part of the past in which observations in question occurred. But the truth of the standard inductive conclusion requires that the regularity in question existed as well in the unobserved past and will continue to exist in the future, which does not follow from its existence in the observed past⁷.

The author is aware that the adequate consideration of this objection would need some flight into metaphysical issues. But the author insists that a solution to the problem of induction depends on the tenability of a non-Humean robust conception of objective regularity. He says that such a conception is intuitively quite plausible and also seems to provide the only alternative to skepticism.

'*In Defense of Pure Reason*' provides a very impressive defense of Rationalism as well as *a priori* justification of knowledge. It also presents fair empiricism. The attempt to formulate a moderate version of rationalism is worth noticing. The whole attempt is directed towards presenting that schema of rationalism which will be free from the drawbacks of strong version of rationalism without being unloyal to the rationalistic approach towards knowledge and reality.

The author very rightly chooses the problem of induction as a paradigm case for the vindication of moderate rationalism and *a priori* justification. He brings out that it is the problem of induction which is a very weak area for all the forms of empiricism. No empiricist account can provide an epistemologically satisfying answer to this problem. The author argues that if induction can be justified at all, it is only the moderate version of rationalism that can provide method for it.

The whole attempt in this book is directed towards reconciling rationalism with experience. This reconciling tendency of the author was also visible in his earlier book "*The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*" where he presents a combination of correspondence theory of truth and the coherence theory of epistemic justification. The author's continuous intention has been to provide a well-articulated all-inclusive structure of knowledge without touching any line of extremity of the thought. But such attempts, though apparently found to be providing model/ideal solutions to the problem after thorough examination, prove to be question begging. Same is the case with Bonjour's attempt to provide moderate account of rationalism.

1. The author says that if philosophy has any intellectual standing, it itself is *a priori*. That is, both rationalism and empiricism should be justified by appeal to rational insight, if at all they can be justified. In the elaboration of moderate rationalism the author says that *a priori* insights are not infallible and discuss two ways of correcting the mistakes and selecting the right *a priori* insight. But are these two ways useful in selecting one of the views e.g. rationalism and empiricism? Can philosophical views which according to the author are outcome of rational insights, be selected either by further reflection or by appeal to coherence? Can the disparity between rival philosophical views like rationalism and empiricism be resolved by appeal to these methods? And moreover if a hypothetical case is assumed in which one philosophical position is shown to be mistaken do the philosophers holding that position cease to hold it? Though the

author claims that the proportion of mistakes or disparities is very less still these problems in resolving them cannot be overlooked.

2. While discussing the epistemological objections to moderate rationalism the author rules out the need for metajustification of the rational insight on the ground that each instance of apparent rational insight should be construed as epistemologically autonomous. But this contention is exactly opposite to the author's previous position elaborated in "*The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*" where he argues against any kind of epistemological foundationalism. While criticizing foundationalism the author points out that the common problem which all versions of foundationalism have to face is that they do not make it clear from where does the non-inferential justification for the basic empirical beliefs come from. But the same problem will be faced by the view that each and every example of *a priori* insight should be regarded as epistemologically self-sufficient. The author like empiricist foundationalist is not able to depict the source from where the justification or metajustification for *a priori* insight is derived. And if he is ready to confer autonomy on the rational insight the same status should be given to the basic empirical beliefs. If doctrine of epistemic autonomy is permissible on rationalistic account of knowledge, it should be equally permissible on empiricist account of knowledge. In that case rationalism and empiricism will stand as equivalent opposites regarding the problem of knowledge and the rationalism will not gain any epistemological superiority over empiricism at least on the ground of doctrine of epistemic autonomy.
3. The Problem of the epistemic autonomy faced by *a priori* insight weakens the author's solution to the problem of induction. The non-chance, epistemic justification of the conclusion of inductive argument is derived from the rational insight regarding the objective regularity existing in the world. But this is a metaphysical

solution to the problem rather than epistemological. If Strawson's solution which is mentioned and criticized by the author is reconsidered in this light one would say that it provides epistemological grounds to defend induction rather than appealing to any objective regularity. And even if the appeal to metaphysical contentions is left aside Bonjour's solution to the problem of induction is more intuitive than presenting rigorous epistemological arguments in support. Thus, though in the beginning Bonjour criticizes other solution to this problem on the ground of not being epistemologically satisfactory and is himself prepared to present one which is epistemologically more satisfying the actual formulation doesn't serve the purpose.

Though the discussion in this book is question begging, the most creditable feature of this book is to highlight the Rationalism in the most unfavorable circumstances. Majority of the contemporary philosophers argue in favor of some or the other kind of empiricism. Bonjour on this background reopens the issue with his presentation of the defence of rationalized view. He has become successful in grabbing the attraction of the philosophers towards the issue, and also in highlighting the epistemological problems which are nowadays sidetracked by most philosophers. He has made the empiricist thinkers to reconsider their positions in the light of the criticism presented in this book. Thus it would be counted as a major contribution to Epistemology as well as to the area of pure reason.

NOTES

1. Bonjour, L. *In Defense of Pure Reason* (1998), p.8
2. *Ibid*, p.11
3. The main intention of the author is to show that Empiricism cannot be justified on pure empirical grounds and that it stands in need of a rationalist or *a priori* justification.

4. This point is elaborated later which has very close reference in the author's own earlier book, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, Cambridge, Mass : Harvard University Press, 1985.
5. For elaborate reference, Refer -Bonjour, *In Defense of Pure Reason*, p.193.
6. In the opinion of the author, Strawson makes confusion between the two phrases viz., 'Believing when the evidence is strong according to generally accepted standards' and 'Believing in accordance with strong evidence'. For more details refer : *ibid*, pp.196-199.

MEENAL KATARNIKAR