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The transmogrification of a posteriori knowledge: reply to Brueckner

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Jessica Brown stipulated that, in virtue of a subject's partial understanding of a concept,

- (C) A subject can know a priori that (1) he is unsure about whether a certain concept applies to a type of thing and (2) there is a determinate fact about whether it does so apply. (Brown 2001: 215)

She seems to envisage the following departure from full understanding. I might know a priori that either bureau does apply to bookshelves with extendable shelves and shelf locks or it does not. But I don't know which. Suppose that otherwise I display normal competence about bureaux. One challenge to Brown is to say: our concept of bureau does not require that we know it has determinate application in the case in question. That is not an objection that either Anthony Brueckner or I are pursuing. Brueckner seems to presume that, even if this knowledge is required for our possession of the concept, we cannot know it a priori. He considers

a more radical case to which he takes me to be responding – a case in which a subject has no dispositions to apply the concept of bureau. But my point was not meant to apply to the radical case but to challenge the presumption behind his rejection of the original case.

Both Brueckner and I agree that, in the situation envisaged, a subject could not know that a concept had determinate application in conditions of uncertainty (as opposed to being vague in our idiolect) without knowing a posteriori that he or she was a member of a language community. My point was that even if possession of a concept requires a posteriori knowledge concerning its application, this does not establish that the knowledge we may obtain through its exercise is a posteriori. So, as I wrote, ‘Even if a posteriori knowledge about one’s membership of a linguistic community were required to know that the concept expressed by “bureau” had determinate application under conditions of uncertainty, that would not mean that the master of the concept failed to know a priori that the concept had this feature’ (Noordhof 2002: 50). Brown argues that the knowledge will be a priori. If so, then knowledge which one arrives at a posteriori in order to possess the concept becomes transmogrified into a priori knowledge after the successful possession of the concept in question. The objection to externalism was that its theory of concept possession allowed for the process of transmogrification to apply to knowledge about the external world of a sort we would never have thought possible candidates for being a priori. It was precisely for this reason that I thought it crucial to challenge Brown’s argument that truths arrived at through our possession of a concept are a priori.¹

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¹ My thanks to Michael Clark for his concision and, especially, Anthony Brueckner for kindly persevering with me until I was clear about the nature of our disagreement and enabling me to express it more clearly.