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CONTINGENT *A PRIORI* TRUTHS, ILLOCUTIONARY ACTS, AND *DE RE* KNOWLEDGE

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SUMMARY: In this paper, I analyze Ruffino’s proposal that we should evaluate contingent *a priori* truths resulting from initial baptisms (i.e., propositions that are uttered to introduce of a new word to a community’s vocabulary) as illocutionary acts. I argue that, even if we concede such an interpretation as the correct way to understand the phenomenon, it is not sufficient to support the claim that there are cases of contingent *a priori* truths that provide the speaker with *de re* knowledge about objects that are not themselves conventional in some way.

KEYWORDS: speech acts, semantics, institutional facts, declaratives, epistemology

RESUMEN: En este artículo, analizo la propuesta de Ruffino de que las verdades contingentes *a priori* resultantes de los bautismos iniciales (es decir, las proposiciones que se emiten para introducir una nueva palabra en el vocabulario de una comunidad) deberían evaluarse como actos ilocucionarios. Argumento que, incluso si admitimos que esta interpretación es la forma correcta de comprender el fenómeno, no es suficiente para sustentar la tesis de que existen casos de verdades contingentes *a priori* que proporcionan al hablante conocimiento *de re* acerca de objetos que no son convencionales de alguna manera.

PALABRAS CLAVE: actos de habla, semántica, hechos institucionales, actos declarativos, epistemología

Introduction

In his book *Contingent A Priori Truths*, Marco Ruffino addresses the titular phenomenon. The idea of contingent *a priori* truths is introduced in Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity*.¹ Kripke argues that certain sentences, such as the one spoken by the baptizer about the standard meter stick *S*, “*S* is one meter in length at time *t*₀”, express true contingent propositions that can be known *a priori*, at least by the baptizer themselves. The initial choice of a physical object to represent the abstract standard is arbitrary and, therefore, contingent on the circumstances. The reason for this is twofold: (i) *S* could

¹ Kripke 1980.

be bigger or smaller depending on the variation of temperature we assume in a counterfactual situation, and (ii) the baptizer could have chosen an entirely different stick with different characteristics and length. However, according to Kripke, no empirical investigation is needed for the baptizer to know that *S* is one meter long at t_0 . Because they chose stick *S* to represent the standard, they do not need to measure it to know it is one meter. Hence, this would be a special case in which the true proposition expressed by the sentence “Stick *S* is one meter in length at time t_0 ” is both contingent and knowable *a priori* to the baptizer.

Kripke’s position has proved controversial. Many philosophers discussing contingent *a priori* truths question whether we can obtain substantial² knowledge from them. Amongst these philosophers are Donnellan (1977) and Salmon (1986), who both argue that knowledge of contingent *a priori* truths amounts to knowledge of linguistic facts, not knowledge of the world.

As a response to this type of concern, Ruffino proposes to revise Kripke’s thesis of the contingent *a priori* by establishing a new interpretation of the phenomenon. Ruffino argues that to correctly understand it, we should address the fact that Kripke’s examples concern initial baptisms (such as the sentence about the standard meter stick). He claims that we should resort to speech act theory to fully understand such utterances as performative acts: initial baptisms are linguistic acts capable of making the propositional content of such sentences true when uttered in the right circumstances. Ruffino explores this dimension of the phenomenon to explain how substantial contingent *a priori* truths are possible.

In this paper, I analyze Ruffino’s proposal. First, I follow Ruffino in adapting Austin’s speech act theory to accommodate Kripke’s classic example of the standard meter stick sentence in the context of the initial baptism of the term “meter”. Next, I build on Salmon’s critique of contingent *a priori* truths by using as an example the creation of social groups to show that there is an explanatory gap between acquiring knowledge about an institutionalized fact and the acquisition of *de re* knowledge about natural facts about the members of that group. Finally, I suggest that Ruffino’s arguments for substantial knowledge acquisition *via* contingent *a priori* truths are not conclusive because regardless of whether the acquired knowledge

²I use the term “substantial knowledge” to refer to knowledge that is not linguistic in nature. The term is meant to pick knowledge of such things as brute facts and institutional facts.

is of linguistic or institutional facts, such knowledge is reducible to knowledge of conventional truths.

Ruffino's interpretation of Contingent A Priori Truths

Ruffino's proposal amounts to a defense of the position that contingent *a priori* sentences do more than establish linguistic facts. Ruffino's first step towards that goal is to understand baptisms such as utterances about the standard meter stick as illocutionary acts. In effect, he identifies the truth-maker of a contingent *a priori* truth with a felicity condition for a successful utterance of the baptizing sentence other than some *a posteriori* requirement, such as acquaintance with the objects involved in the propositions considered. His second step is to draw on Searle's account of institutional facts and to argue that when the baptizer utters "Stick *S* is one meter in length at time t_0 " they acquire knowledge of an institutional fact. According to Searle, institutional facts are a product of the human capacity to impose standards and functions that are not exclusively derived from physical properties of objects to those same objects.³ According to Ruffino, understanding a standard of measurement as an institutional fact makes available to the speaker *de re* knowledge of stick *S*'s length that it is one meter.⁴ Therefore, Ruffino concludes that it is possible *via* declaration to acquire substantial *a priori* knowledge about the stick *S* — i.e., without perceptual contact with *S*.

According to Ruffino, Kripke's account of contingent *a priori* truths leaves the nature of the truth-maker of these propositions unclear. Ruffino also thinks that an interpretation of the phenomenon as an illocutionary act can explain the existence of the critical claim that contingent *a priori* truths are a product of linguistic knowledge alone. If the truth-maker of such truths has not been established, some may think —like Donnellan (1977)— that contingent *a priori* truths are a consequence of Kripke's thesis regarding the rigidity of names. In Kripke's view, a description such as "the length of stick *S* at t_0 " is non-rigid, because it will refer to whatever satisfies the pertinent description in a given circumstance. However, once the description is used to fix the reference of the abstract length of one meter, the name "meter" will refer to whatever satisfies the

³ Searle 1995, p. 40.

⁴ Here I follow Kripke's usage of the term "de re": "The term "de re" simply means that it is a belief (or whatever other attitude) of or about a particular person or object" Kripke 2011, p. 327.

description at t_0 —the name will always pick out the same abstract length in any circumstance considered.⁵

So, it appears that linguistic knowledge is all that is required for the baptizer to know that the sentence “one meter is the length of stick S at t_0 ” is true given that the baptizer fixes the referent of the term “meter” via the description “the length of stick S at t_0 ”. But if all it takes for the baptizer to know that the meter sentence is true is knowledge regarding the reference-fixing mechanism of a name, then the speaker would only have a *de dicto* access to that truth. In other words, they would know *that* the proposition is true, without knowing *about* the truth that it expresses —without *de re* cognitive access to the referent of the term “meter”. That is to say, the baptizer would not acquire any substantial knowledge about S 's length.

Ruffino argues that this criticism is a mistake because it does not take into account that Kripke's cases of contingent *a priori* are initial baptisms —and, therefore, involve stipulations. According to Ruffino, the best way to honor the uniqueness of such examples is by understanding sentences such as “one meter is the length of stick S at t_0 ” not as mere assertions, but as stipulations, which are declarative acts.⁶ For declarative acts, the truth-maker of the proposition expressed in the speech act is a convention resulting from the speaker's engagement in such an act. All illocutionary acts, such as baptizing, defining, and nominating, are all a result of illocutionary force (the general point or purpose of performing an illocutionary act, e.g., stipulation, definition, etc.) applied to a meaningful expression (i.e., propositional content). In particular, the declaratives are a subgroup of illocutionary acts that make propositional content true by means of the very act of uttering such a sentence with illocutionary force (given appropriate circumstances).⁷

Take as an example a priest in a wedding ceremony.⁸ When he utters the sentence “I hereby declare you husband and wife” the priest creates the fact —of an officiated marriage— that makes such a sentence true, given appropriate circumstances. Before the priest's declaration, there is no fact of the matter that makes it true of that

⁵ Kripke argues that the difference between the name's and description's behavior is a result of their —also distinct— semantic contents (i.e., meanings). A name's semantic content is not descriptive —it is directly referential instead (its content is reduced to the object it refers to).

⁶ Austin (1962, p. 6) famously denies that performatives are statements.

⁷ This clause is going to be further developed and explained below.

⁸ This example is taken from Austin 1962.

couple that they are married. After the priest's declaration, the marriage exists if the pre-conditions for the priest's declaration are appropriate. This means that if the couple did not get their marriage license ahead of time, or if one of them was already previously married and has yet to divorce, then the priest has no power to bring their marriage into existence *via* his declaration. Hence, preparatory conditions must be satisfied for a declarative act to be successful. Additionally, declaratives often require that the surrounding linguistic community follow what is established with the performative as a rule, given that the rule becomes obsolete as soon as that community does not accept the definition stated. In the wedding example, the marriage only survives as an institutionalized fact if the witnesses and the couple adjust their behavior accordingly.

Returning to the meter case, it is only because the speech act performed by the baptizer is successful that the propositional content of "one meter is the length of stick *S* at t_0 " is true. Thus, under Ruffino's interpretation, it is because the preparatory conditions were satisfied (e.g., the baptizer had the required authority to choose the standard of the meter), that the baptizer can know *a priori* that it is true that the length of the stick *S* at t_0 is one meter. Ruffino concedes that someone may need empirical evidence to know that the preconditions of a successful performative act have been satisfied.⁹ Nonetheless, his point is that once the speaker acknowledges that a declaration is successful, no empirical knowledge is required for them to have access to the truth they uttered. Hence, once the baptizer knows that the preconditions are satisfied and that his utterance is successful, he also knows *a priori* that that is true.

Ruffino distinguishes what is required to know whether a speech act was successful from the justification of its propositional content as true.¹⁰ He further claims that one's justification that the content of the speech act is true requires no further empirical evidence but simply the fact that a successful definition was made. Additionally, he argues that the epistemic status of a proposition as *a priori* or *a posteriori* should be based on the justification of beliefs about that same proposition rather than on one's justification that the preparatory conditions for a successful speech act are satisfied. According to Ruffino, understanding the proposition expressed (i.e., its meaning) is one of the preconditions for a successful declaration. As a consequence of compositionally, knowing a proposition's meaning is

⁹ Ruffino 2022, pp. 184–185.

¹⁰ Ruffino 2022, p. 184.

knowing the meaning of its parts. Hence, says Ruffino, any *de re* beliefs or knowledge involving one meter or *S*'s length can be inferred from the fact that the baptism was successful. In sum, *de re* knowledge of *S*'s length and of one meter are understood as outcomes from a successful stipulation.

Moreover, Ruffino further relies on Searle's (2009) notion of institutional facts to argue that the knowledge acquired *via* a declarative act is not merely linguistic (even though it is an outcome of a successful stipulation). Recall that, on Searle's view, institutional facts are a product of the human capacity to impose standards and functions that are not exclusively derived from physical properties of objects to those same objects. These facts are social facts, not only because of their origin, but also because they depend on the acceptance of several members of a community to be maintained. Ruffino highlights that baptisms such as the meter sentence satisfy both of Searle's requirements for a fact to be institutional: (i) they have word-to-world direction of fit because they create the corresponding facts *via* illocutionary acts; and (ii) they rely on the acceptance of several members of a linguistic community to set forth new standards.¹¹ In the case of the meter sentence, the meter stick has the same length before and after the stipulation is made. However, after the stipulation, there is an institutional fact that makes it possible to truly report that the stick is one meter long, and to compare the lengths of other objects' to this new standard. So, Ruffino argues that the truth-makers of propositions such as the meter sentence are institutional facts rather than mere linguistic ones. Consequently, because the baptizer is imposing upon the meter stick the function of serving as a standard of measurement, they can know *a priori* and *de re* the (institutional) fact that *S*'s length is one meter.

Word Introduction, Linguistic Competence, and Other Institutional Facts

As we have seen, Ruffino proposes that contingent *a priori* cases should be understood as declarative acts, and that the truth-makers of such propositions are institutional facts. However, his theory does not come without implicit assumptions. Firstly, in the cases of initial baptisms, Ruffino appears to assume that the preparatory conditions for all illocutionary acts include having *de re* access to the concepts and objects involved in such propositions. In what follows, I challenge this assumption. Addressing this involves answering questions

¹¹ Ruffino 2022, p. 183ss.

regarding what it takes to be a competent speaker and what is involved in adding a new word to a linguistic community's vocabulary. Secondly, even if the new word is successfully established, I argue that it should not be assumed that knowing that there is a new standard in place leads to knowledge about the object used to establish the standard. To illustrate this point, I build on Salmon's criticism of contingent *a priori* truths by using examples of the creation of social groups. In particular, in cases where a social group is created, I contend that knowledge about the institutionalized group is a separate matter from knowledge about its members.

According to Ruffino, the preparatory conditions for an illocutionary act include understanding the proposition being uttered. It is implied that understanding such propositions involves having *de re* access to the concepts and objects involved in such propositions.¹² So, for a successful baptism of one meter as *S*'s length, he argues that we need to have *de re* access to the components of the proposition expressed by the sentence "one meter is the length of stick *S* at t_0 ". Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that the illocutionary acts that lead to contingent *a priori* truths are initial baptisms. Therefore, not only do they make the content true *via* successful declaration, but by doing so they introduce a new word into a community's vocabulary. If this is the case, it is plausible to say that understanding the proposition involved in a declaration involves understanding the meaning of the description used to fix the referent of the term — without necessarily knowing what (if anything) is the one and only thing that satisfies such a description. The reason for this is that the name (such as "meter") is not a name of anything up until the declaration is successful. So, the name will only have semantic content and meaning attached to it *via* a declaration.

Hence, in this scenario, whether the proposition is meaningful relies on the definite description involved being meaningful. But a definite description can be meaningful whether or not there is something in the world that satisfies such a description, because as long as someone understands its descriptive content, that is enough to understand the description.¹³ So, in the meter example, nothing more

¹² In his words, "once it is known which proposition is expressed by that utterance, there is no further appeal to experience in order to justify it and, in that sense, we can say that we know *a priori* the proposition expressed" (2022, p. 184).

¹³ In the meter sentence case, it could be argued that knowing that *S* exists is also a requirement for the declaration of "one meter is the length of stick *S* in t_0 " to be successful. That would result in some knowledge about *S* being derivable from the baptism. However, that is not equivalent to requiring *de re* knowledge about stick *S*.

is needed to understand the proposition expressed by “one meter is the length of stick S in t_0 ” than understanding the meaning of “the length of stick S at t_0 ”. If my reasoning is correct, understanding the proposition in the way Ruffino suggests (in terms of being *de re* connected to the components of the proposition) is not necessary to establish that the speech act is successful. Consequently, if being *de re* connected to all the components of the proposition is not a precondition for a successful speech act of an initial baptisms, having *de re* access to S and to one meter does entail *a posteriori* knowledge.

On another note, I want to point out that the acquisition of institutional knowledge in cases like the meter sentence does not amount to anything too substantial. In fact, I suggest that without *de re* access to S or any other instantiation of the abstract length of one meter, someone cannot have an operational idea about what length is one meter. This point becomes clear through Salmon’s¹⁴ distinction between two kinds of *de re* knowledge concerning the meter sentence:

- (i) knowledge concerning S that its length is such-and-such,
- (ii) knowledge concerning S ’s length that it is such-and-such.

One is *de re* knowledge about the stick S in particular, while the other is *de re* knowledge of a length (one meter) that happens to be S ’s length. According to Salmon, one could have knowledge about S ’s length without knowing or thinking about that length as S ’s length,¹⁵ or even without having any knowledge or concept of the stick S . That is arguably a consequence of the direct reference theory since, if we accept that names (like “one meter”) directly refer to objects (like, the abstract length), then a name’s content does not mirror the speaker’s epistemic access to its the referent. In other words, whether a speaker understands (i.e., is cognitively connected to) the referent of a term like “one meter” under the guise of “the length of stick S ” or “the standard of measurement” is not transparent in the semantic content of the term “one meter”. So, one might be thinking of the

For instance, somebody can get to know *via* testimony that S exists without having any beliefs about its length. Moreover, it is possible to get rid of this particular requirement (having knowledge that S exists) if the declaration is spelled out as “The stick S in t_0 , if S exists, is one meter”.

¹⁴ Salmon’s distinction can be found in his paper “Ruffino on the Contingent *A Priori*” published in this volume.

¹⁵ i.e., knowledge under a difference guise. For more on this matter, see Salmon 2007.

length entirely independently of *S*. Consequently, one could have *de re* access to *S*'s length without deriving any *de re* knowledge about *S*.

Salmon's distinction can be used to show that stating institutional facts is not enough for Ruffino to argue that we can acquire *a priori de re* knowledge about stick *S* (e.g. knowledge concerning *S*). To illustrate, consider the case of the Supreme Court. Let's assume that, in the moment of the creation of the Supreme Court somebody stated, "The Supreme Court is the highest federal court in the US, consisting of nine justices and its decisions take precedence over all other courts' decisions in the nation". In this example, it is clear that the baptizer has *de re* knowledge of the institutional fact without having *de re* knowledge about its members at the time. Even though the nine justices do constitute the Court's membership (at a given time), the Supreme Court as an institution is distinct from its members. On one hand, the Supreme Court is a single entity and is an institution that persists through time. However, its members are a plurality and may vary through time as some of them retire or get replaced. Moreover, a person can have beliefs or knowledge about the Supreme Court and its role in U.S. legislation without having beliefs or knowledge about any of the individual justices that comprise the Supreme Court at any given time. Hence, it is plausible to say that such a baptism would provide the speaker with knowledge of the institutional fact and no *de re* knowledge about its members at the time, not even knowledge that they were the members at that time.

Going back to the meter stick case, it is plausible that knowledge about the standard of the meter *qua* institutional fact, does not guarantee knowledge about *S* that it is a certain length. In other words, there is a distinction between the concept of an abstract standardized length that is instantiated by a particular stick *S* and knowing of *S* that it has a certain length. Consequently, someone (even the baptizer) can only know *a posteriori* about *S* that it is a certain length. Additionally, if fixing the referent of the term "meter" requires understanding the definite description "the length of stick *S* in t_0 " but not having contact with *S*'s length, then neither kind of *de re* knowledge (of *S* or of the standard length) is guaranteed by the stipulation alone. The baptizer would know that *S* is the new standard —without knowing *S*'s length yet. However, if the baptizer knows neither about *S* that it has a certain length, nor about *S*'s length, then their operative notion about what length is one meter can only be *a posteriori*.

Both points that I bring up here raise the question of what the necessary conditions are for a speaker to be considered competent in the use of a new term or for this new term to be successfully introduced.¹⁶ Only with a stronger claim about what is required to establish a new word in a linguistic community or what is required for someone to become a competent user of that new word Ruffino can successfully argue that *a posteriori* knowledge is not necessary in these circumstances and why. Otherwise, to resist my criticism, Ruffino could argue that there is a distinction to be made between the introduction of a new ordinary name and the introduction of a new scientific term.¹⁷ Perhaps, the introduction of new scientific terms must satisfy higher standards than those of ordinary names. For instance, Ruffino could argue that, in order to create the relevant scientific institutional fact, it is necessary that the meaning of “one meter” be assigned by someone who has (among other things) *de re* access to the relevant stick. If so, for proper scientific stipulation, *de re* access is a preparatory condition for meaning fixing. However, this route is not without its challenges.

Ruffino proposes that acquaintance is neither necessary nor sufficient for *de re* knowledge. He argues for this position on the basis of perception being an unreliable source of *de re* knowledge. According to Ruffino, (i) contact with *S* is not necessary to have an operative notion of *S*'s length; and (ii) contact with *S* is not sufficient to have an operative notion of *S*'s length. In this context, an operative notion of *S*'s length is defined in terms of a precise enough notion of *S*'s length that allows the stipulator to distinguish that length from others. To support his first claim, Ruffino considers a circumstance in which stick *S* is wrapped up inside a gift box, and the box provides enough information for an operative notion of *S*'s length. To argue for the second claim, he stresses the fact that seeing an object from different perspectives can provide different appearances of that object's size.

As I see it, Ruffino would have to further develop an account of the cognitive process in order to defend the idea that perception of *S* is not sufficient to have the appropriate cognitive contact with its length. The reason for that is twofold. First, intuitively speaking, it seems plausible to say that perception of an object in an environment does not occur in isolation. By which I mean, seeing stick *S* initially

¹⁶ In his book, Ruffino identifies two gaps in Kripke's view, and I would say there is a third gap: there is no clear account of what it takes to be a competent speaker.

¹⁷ I am grateful for the anonymous reviewer who brought this point to my attention.

involves also perceiving its surroundings, and that seems (in normal circumstances) enough input to our cognition to adjust the idea of *S*'s length in comparison with the surrounding objects, or to have an idea of how far or close the object is. Second, there is evidence that the learning process for abstract concepts would require experience of particular cases from which to generalize. For instance, Leslie (2007) has argued, informed by the work of Gelman (2003) and Chomsky (2000), that the default generalization mechanism of the mind shows up in language use in the form of generics—which resort to particulars and their most relevant characteristics to create abstract concepts such as those of natural kinds.¹⁸ Unless argued otherwise, it is not too far-fetched to suppose that all abstract concepts, including those pertaining to institutional facts, come from a similar cognitive process. Hence, our cognitive process might require acquaintance with a particular (such as stick *S*) in order to be able to produce an idea of the abstract length that is one meter.

Partial Remarks

In this paper, I have analyzed Ruffino's proposed interpretation of contingent *a priori* truths as speech acts. We have seen that his proposal is to understand baptisms as declarative acts that have the power to make true the propositional content expressed by the sentence uttered, given appropriate circumstances. For that reason, Ruffino argues, such truths are justified by the utterance made and the creation of institutional facts. His account has the virtue of helping us understand such institutional facts and question both their relation to brute facts and the conditions for linguistic competence—both are underexplored topics in Kripke's work. However, we have also seen that Ruffino's account does not guarantee him *de re* knowledge of the objects involved in a proposition expressed by a declaration. On the contrary, there seems to be room for maintaining the requirement of experience in order to derive *de re* knowledge about objects. Whether or not I am successful in arguing for the latter, I hope this paper can instigate further developments on the interpretation of contingent *a priori* truths as speech acts.¹⁹

¹⁸ There are empirical studies that sustain generics as primitive components of our language as in Gelman 2003; Roeper, Strauss, and Pearson 2006.

¹⁹ I am grateful to my colleagues Katherina Gontaryuk, David Mokriski, and Jordan Neidinger for their careful reading and comments on a previous draft of this paper.

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