Quine on conventionalism, take 2

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Last time we discussed Quine's argument against the idea that a priori and necessary truth could be explained in terms of linguistic stipulations or conventions. Here's another try at explaining his argument in simpler terms. According to Ayer, all a priori truths are knowable on the basis of knowing our linguistic conventions. So let's take as an example of an a priori truth,

(1) If grass is green, then grass is green.

How are we supposed to know (1) a priori? The idea is that we have made some linguistic stipulation of the following sort:

(2) All sentences of the form ⌜If P, then P⌝ are true.

The idea is then that we can know (1) a priori on the basis of our knowledge of (2); and to know (2) all we need to know is knowledge of our own linguistic stipulations; and this knowledge is presumably unproblematic.

Quine can be thought of as saying to the conventionalist: "OK, let's grant you that our knowledge of (2) is unproblematic. But what I wanted to know was how we can know (1) a priori. What's your explanation of *that*?"

The natural conventionalist reply is: "Well, (1) follows from (2)." But that plainly can't be the whole explanation of our a priori knowledge of (1); we often know that something is true without knowing that things which follow from it are true. After all, we are not logically omniscient.

At this stage, it seems that the conventionalist should say: "OK, I was speaking loosely. It isn't just that (1) follows from (2); it's also that we *know* a priori that (2) follows from (1). And if I know a priori that P, and know a priori that Q follows from P, surely this puts me in a position to know a priori that Q as well."

Much of this imagined conventionalist speech is plausible. But notice what the conventionalist has done: he has, in explaining how we can know (1) a priori, appealed to a priori knowledge of another claim, namely

(3) If all sentences of the form ⌜If P, then P⌝ are true, then 'If grass is green, then grass is green' is true.

But then we can ask the conventionalist: what is your account of our a priori knowledge of (3)? Here the conventionalist might again appeal to our knowledge of linguistic stipulations, like

(4) If all sentences of the form ⌜If P, then P⌝ are true, then, if S is a sentence of this form, then S is true.

But the same problem will recur, since we will need to explain how we can know (3) on the basis of (2); and just like our conventionalist explanation of the knowledge of (1) on the basis of (2) required appeal to a priori knowledge of (3), so our explanation of our knowledge of (3) on the basis of (4) will appeal to a priori knowledge of the truth of something like

(5) If (if all sentences of the form ⌜If P, then P⌝ are true, then, if S is a sentence of this form, then S is true) then (if all sentences of the form ⌜If P, then P⌝ are true, then 'If grass is green, then grass is green' is true).

And we will, of course, then have to ask: what is the explanation of our a priori knowledge of (5)?

One way to think about this problem is as stemming from the fact that although there are infinitely many claims which are knowable a priori, we only make finitely many linguistic stipulations. Hence the conventionalist always has to make use of *inferences* from linguistic stipulations to the particular instances of a priori knowledge we wanted to explain. But these inferences must themselves be based on a priori knowledge. Hence we never really get an explanation of our a priori knowledge of, for example, (1); at each stage of the explanation, there is some bit of a priori knowledge which remains unexplained.