

COMMENTS ON CARL GINET'S “SELF-EVIDENCE”

Juan Comesaña*

There is much in Ginet's paper to admire. In particular, it is the clearest exposition that I know of a view of the *a priori* based on the idea that concept-possession involves belief. It was an honor and a pleasure for me to deliver comments on his paper at the Conference on Keith Lehrer's epistemology at the PUCRS, and I welcome the opportunity to continue the discussion in these pages.

In what follows I touch upon two themes in Ginet's paper: his reliance on a very strict notion of “full understanding” and a more general concern about any view that ties understanding to belief. I begin with a discussion of Ginet's worries about the sentence-relativity of his definitions, because his treatment of this issue helps to bring out some of the problems considered later.

1. Sentence-relativity

Ginet's definitions are in terms of what sentences say. For instance, the following is Ginet's preliminary definition of self-evidence:¹

(D1-prelim) For any declarative sentence p whose meaning is such that what the sentence p says does not vary from one context of utterance to another, it is self-evident that p if and only if: the sentence p is such that, for any person S , if S understands what the sentence p says then it follows that S believes what it says, namely, that p .

Ginet thinks that this sentence-relativity raises a potential problem for his definition:

This relativizing of understanding to sentences might be thought to introduce a problem for our definition of self-evidence. If there are sentences p and q that say the same thing but are such that p satisfies the definiens of

* PhD. in Philosophy, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Arizona.

¹ The reason why it is only a preliminary definition of self-evidence is orthogonal to the issues I want to discuss.

(D1-prelim) but q does not, then our definition would force us to say that what p says is self-evident but what q says is not self-evident, even though what p says is the same as what q says – a violation of Leibniz's law.

In my comments on a previous version of the paper I puzzled over Ginet's involved answer to this problem, for I suggested that there is a very quick argument for the conclusion that there cannot be two sentences p and q such that they both say the same thing and yet only one of them count as self-evident according to (D1-prelim). The argument was the following: if p satisfies the definiens of (D1), that means that every subject that fully understands p believes what p says, and if q says the same thing as p , then every subject who fully understands q *also* believes what q says, for he believes what p says, and q says the very same thing. It is impossible, then, for two sentences to be such that they say the same thing and yet only one of them satisfies the definiens of (D1) – impossible *as a matter of logic*, regardless of what we mean by “full understanding” and “what a sentence says.” Ginet replies to that point in footnote 3 of the published version of the paper. His reply seems to me worthy of examination, because it raises a potentially problematic issue.

Ginet argues that from

1. S understands what p says

and

2. What p says is identical to what q says

we cannot deduce, by Leibniz's Law, that

3. S understands what q says,

because (1) provides an intensional context for “what p says,” and so we cannot substitute co-referentials *salva veritate*. The reason why (1) provides an intensional context for “what p says” is that (1) entails

(1') S knows some truth of the form ‘What p says is that r ’,

and ‘knows’ introduces an intensional context. Now, there are two problems with that conception of what it is to understand what a sentence says. The first one is very minor: it seems to me that, as we ordinarily use the term “understand,” to know a truth of the form “What p says is that r ” may be needed in order to understand *the sentence p* , but surely not in order to understand *what p says*. Thus, a monolingual Japanese speaker understands what the sentence *snow is white* says, although he doesn't understand the sentence *snow is white*. As I say, this is a very minor concern, for Ginet can claim that the notion of

understanding what a sentence says is a technical term of his theory, to be understood so as to make it the case that (1) entails (1').² The more serious concern is that we are explaining a priori knowledge in terms of a posteriori knowledge. For it will turn out that one way for S to know a priori that p essentially involves it being self-evident that p. But if self-evidence is in turn understood in terms of knowing truths regarding what sentences say, then we are explaining this kind of a priori knowledge in terms of a posteriori knowledge.³ So, even though I agree that Ginet's understanding of understanding makes my quick argument unavailable, it raises some serious issues that should be addressed.

Let us go back to how Ginet proposes to handle the alleged problem generated by the sentence-relativity of his definitions. Ginet considers a pair of sentences that, he thinks, illustrate "the most plausible sort of candidate" for raising the problem of sentence-relativity. The sentences are (A) " $10+10=20$ " (in decimal notation) and (B) " $1010+1010=10100$ " (in binary notation). Ginet argues that there is no problem after all, for (A) and (B) do not say the same thing – (A) says that one ten plus one ten equals two tens, whereas (B) says that one eight plus one two, plus one eight plus one two, equals one sixteen plus one four. I will make two brief remarks regarding Ginet's treatment of this issue.

First, notice that it requires the acceptance of a very fine-grained notion of proposition (what a sentence says). If, for instance, one thinks that propositions are sets of possible worlds, then of course sentences (A) and (B) say the same thing. This may not strike one as a problem, for there may be reasons to reject the coarse-grained understanding of propositions. And Ginet now explicitly says, in footnote 6, that "in [his] view to individuate things sentences say, propositions, in such a way that they are identical if necessarily equivalent is not to individuate them finely enough". But the point goes much deeper than merely noticing the hyperintensionality of Ginet's notion of proposition. Notice *how* fine-grained propositions will have to be according to Ginet: if two sentences (A) and (B) are such that it is *possible* for *anyone* to fully understand them and yet adopt different doxastic attitudes towards them, then they do not say the same thing. Consider now the following pair of sentences:

² But notice that Ginet does think that one can *believe* what a sentence *p* says without knowing any truth of the form "What *p* says is that *r*". Why this difference between belief and understanding?

³ In his comments, Stephen Hetherington proposes that we analyze the notion of understanding at play in Ginet's definition of self-evidence in terms of know-how. This would, as Hetherington notes, avoid the problem of explaining a priori knowledge in terms of a posteriori knowledge, but it is definitely in conflict with Ginet's text.

(C) “ $1+1=2$ ” (in decimal notation), and (D) “ $1+1=10$ ” (in binary notation). Following Ginet’s explanation of what (A) and (B) say, (C) says that one one plus one one equals one two, whereas (D) says that one one plus one one equals one two plus zero ones. Insofar as it seems plausible to consider someone (however irrational) who fully understands both sentences and yet believes only one of them, we are forced to conclude that they say different things. Or consider Kripke’s Pierre, who sincerely asserts “London is pretty” and sincerely denies “Londres est jolie,” even though he fully understands both sentences. Are we to conclude that, therefore, those two sentences say different things? I wonder whether, according to Ginet, there ever are two different sentences that say the same thing.

Ginet could resist the conclusion that (C) and (D), or “London is pretty” and “Londres est jolie” say different things by claiming that someone who believes only one of the sentences in each pair doesn’t fully understand at least one of the sentences in each pair. My second comment regarding the problem of sentence relativity, then, is that it helps to bring out how *strict* Ginet’s requirement of full understanding is: you don’t fully understand a sentence S unless you can recognize which of all the other sentences that you fully understand say the same thing as S. I wonder whether, according to Ginet, anyone ever fully understands a sentence. I turn now to that concern.

2. Full understanding

Let us go back to the issue of what it means for a subject to fully understand what a sentence says. Here’s what Ginet says about this:

For what is required to fully understand what that sentence says is just that (a) one grasps the concept expressed by each of its descriptive (contentful) terms [...] well enough to be able to tell with respect to any candidate case, given sufficient relevant information about it, whether the concept applies in that case – we can speak of this as having application-competence with respect to the term – and (b) one correctly perceives the grammar of the sentence, i.e., one understands the way the sentence is put together well enough to know how the meaning of each of its descriptive terms contributes to what the sentence says.

It seems to me that if this is what it means to fully understand what a sentence says, then almost no one fully understands almost any sentence.

Let us concentrate on clause (a) of Ginet’s definition of full understanding, the requirement of “application competence” for every descriptive term in the sentence. To have application competence for a descriptive term is to be able to tell, *with respect to any candidate case*,

and *given sufficient relevant information about it*, whether the concept expressed by the term applies in that case. Now, we have to be careful about what we admit as relevant information, on pain of trivializing the notion of application competence. Suppose, for instance, that we want to find out whether I have application competence for the terms “regular topological space”. If the information about the relevant cases is allowed to include whether the thing is a regular topological space or not, then *anyone*, no matter how ignorant about topology, will have application competence for the terms “regular topological space”. Clearly, then, when we are checking for application competence regarding a term *x*, the relevant information cannot include whether the candidate case is an *x* or not, nor can it include information that entails that the candidate case is an *x* or not.

Now, with this clarification in mind, I find it hard to believe that any of us has application competence with respect to almost any term. Take, for instance, any “natural kind” term, like *water*. What kind of information about a candidate liquid will be sufficient for me to tell whether it is water or not? Well, certainly the information that it is water will be sufficient, but, for the reason mentioned in the previous paragraph, that cannot be admissible information. How about the information that it is mostly composed of H_2O ? That will work for me and you, but not for someone who doesn't know that water is H_2O . Ginet could reply that someone who doesn't know that water is H_2O is such that he doesn't fully understand *water*. But this cannot be right: if knowing that water is H_2O is necessary for understanding *water*, then (according to Ginet's own definition) it would be *a priori* that water is H_2O – but that is manifestly absurd (and, notice, goes well beyond the claim that we can know *a priori* that there is water around us).

For another example, take the term *tree*. There are some cases of plants that I wouldn't know whether to classify as a shrub or a tree. Indeed, I am told that many plants (such as oaks, brooms, dragon trees and Joshua trees) can develop as either shrubs or trees, depending on the growing conditions they experience. Does that mean that I don't have application competence for the term “tree,” and thus that I don't fully understand any sentence which includes that term?

Let's look at a third example, *table*. Is something with one leg and a top tilted at approximately a 45-degree angle a table? I don't know. What kind of admissible information could remedy my ignorance? None that I can think of.

But if I don't have application-competence with respect to either *water*, *tree* or *table*, then *with respect to what term* am I in a better position? Not, it seems, with respect to any natural kind term. Not either with respect

to any term that is indeterminate (due, perhaps, to vagueness, but also leaving room for other kinds of indeterminacies). That leaves us with precious little in terms of sentences that we fully understand. Perhaps, as Ginet now suggests, mathematical sentences are an exception, but I find it hard to think what it would be to have application-competence with respect to mathematical terms. Take, for instance, *two*. In order to have application-competence with respect to *two*, do I have to know, of any candidate case, whether it is the number two or not? How would I go about doing that? (Do I have to solve one of the most difficult philosophical problems in order to have application-competence with respect to *two*?). Or do I have to know, of every candidate number of objects, whether they are two or not? In that case, the vagueness in the terms for the objects will infect *two* itself with vagueness. According to Ginet, self-evidence requires full understanding. If I am right that we don't fully understand (in Ginet's sense) almost any sentence, then, there are almost no self-evident propositions.

In the published version of the paper, Ginet admits that his characterization of full understanding is apt for many terms in mathematics and logic, "but it will not be apt for many other descriptive terms – for example, terms that are vague ('bald', 'red', 'tall'), evaluative terms whose meaning makes their application essentially contestable ('expensive'), and terms denoting natural kinds about which there are necessary truths that are only empirically discoverable ('water', 'elm', 'tiger') – and it is not apt for proper names ('Hannah', 'London')". He goes on to say that, nevertheless, the complications needed in order to handle those terms will not affect the characterization of self-evidence in terms of full understanding, because "[f]or a great many of the sentences containing such terms that say things that are self-evident, it will be clear that their doing so does not depend on what the right account of those complications is". But my objection wasn't to his account of self-evidence or of a priori knowledge built on it, but rather to his account of full understanding. It still seems to me that many of the reasons why we favor a "more complicated" account of the notion of full understanding than the one provided by Ginet for the case of, e.g., natural kind terms will apply also to mathematics and logic. For instance, if one is impressed by Putnam's arguments regarding the linguistic division of labor, then surely that division of labor takes place as much (or more) in logic and mathematics as it does in botanic.

3. Self-evidence and belief

It seems to me that there is another reason why there are no self-evident propositions in Ginet's sense, even bracketing the concern about

full understanding. What a sentence says is self-evident, according to Ginet, only if *everyone* that fully understands it believes it. In other words, a self-evident proposition is such that fully understanding it entails believing it. Grant for the sake of argument that there are sentences that we fully understand. Take, for instance, the sentence *one plus one equals two*. I very much doubt that understanding it entails believing it. Indeed, there are three kinds of subjects who understand what that sentence says and yet they don't believe it. First there surely could be *irrational* subjects who, although they fully understand the sentence, fail to believe it. Of course, Ginet could side-step this problem by restricting the subjects in his definition to *rational* subjects – but then the project of explaining *a priori* justification in terms of self-evidence will be much less appealing, for we will have an epistemically loaded term in the definiens. Second, why couldn't there be subjects who are not inclined to form any doxastic attitude at all with respect to many of the propositions that they consider? (I owe this suggestion to Earl Conee.) Indeed, why couldn't there be subjects whose whole intellectual life is restricted to understanding (and considering) propositions, not to adopting doxastic attitudes towards them? Those subjects understand perfectly well what the sentence *one plus one equals two* says, and yet they don't believe it. It's not that they "hesitate" to accept what that sentence says, or that they are "uncertain" as to whether to believe it or not – they just are not motivated, or perhaps lack the capacity, to adopt *any* doxastic attitude whatever, including hesitation or uncertainty. They understand, but they don't believe.

But maybe those two cases are somehow problematic. After all, they involve irrational and merely possible subjects.⁴ But there are *actual*, *rational* subjects who understand perfectly well what *one plus one equals two* says and yet don't believe it. Take, for instance, (a time-slice of) Hartry Field, who in his *Science Without Numbers* (Princeton University Press, 1980) argued that mathematical sentences are not true, because they presuppose the existence of platonic entities that simply don't exist.⁵ The problem runs deep, I think, and afflicts every theory of the *a priori* founded on an alleged link between understanding and belief, not just Ginet's.

⁴ To be clear, I don't take the fact that they involve irrational and merely possible subjects as relevant to whether the cases refute Ginet's position or not. I notice that Ginet dismisses, in footnote 11, a proposal by Goldman analogous to my second one.

⁵ And notice that Ginet's official definition of self-evidence, which differs from the one discussed in the text by the addition of the proviso that the subject needs to lack a reason to think that what the sentence says is incoherent, doesn't help here: Field thinks that mathematics is a conservative extension of non-mathematical theories.